

Girlie Girls Aren't "Real" Athletes:  
A Critical Examination of Girls' Experiences of Aesthetic Sports within a Post-Feminist  
Masquerade

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this feminist research was to understand the experiences of adolescent females currently participating in aesthetic sports. Specifically, I aimed to critically examine the ways in which the new feminine ideal and a post-feminist girl culture shape girls' experiences. A social constructionist grounded theory approach was used and a purposive sample of eight girls, between the ages of 12-15, participated in this study. Three major themes that best reflect my interpretation of the experiences of the participants emerged: 1) Masculinities and revealing a higher social status in the school environment, 2) Framing success through gendered and neoliberal discourses, and 3) Constructing an ideal image. Moreover, the major themes resulted in the culmination of experiences leading to the core theme "Falling short of the neoliberal ideal." The study highlights the need for educators and sport practitioners to advocate for a diversity of gender expression.

Key Words: Gender, girls, neoliberalism, sport, post-feminism

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Participation in sport has been found to improve physical and mental health, increase self-esteem, foster healthy social skills, and reduce crime and social dysfunction (Biddle, Whitehead, O'Donovan, & Nevill, 2005; Taylor et al., 2015). Notably, girls' participation in sport is linked to increased self-esteem and body-image (Biddle et al., 2005; Crissey & Honea, 2006), as well as higher academic achievement (Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005; Troutman & Dufur, 2007; Videon, 2002). Although female sport participation remains lower than males (e.g., Van Tuyckom, Scheerder, & Bracke, 2010), participation rates are rising (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Riemer & Visio, 2003). In part, this is an outcome of girl-centered sport programs that have emerged in response to growing public concern over girls' participations rates (Rauscher & Cooky, 2016).

Although sport has the potential to serve as a site for both inclusion and exclusion, it often reproduces social inequalities (Spaaij, Farquharson, & Marjoribanks, 2015). The disruptive potential of women in sport is undermined by myths about inherent differences between men and women, as well as by cultural ideals surrounding femininity (Messner, 1988; Musto & McGann, 2016). As a result, sport reproduces social inequalities and supports the perception that men are athletically superior (Spaaij et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly, then, sport is still considered a masculine domain (Clément-Guillotin, Chalabaev, & Fontayne, 2012). Moreover, although there has been a significant increase in opportunities for girls to participate in masculine sports, gender traits associated with femininity remain devalued (Schmalz, 2013).

To date, there has been limited research by leisure and sport scholars that have examined young women's participation in sport from a socio-cultural perspective. As Messner and Musto (2014) argued in their systematic review of three journals (*Sociology of Sport Journal*,

International Review for the Sociology of Sport, Journal of Sport and Social Issues), there has been a dearth of scholarly research on young people by sport sociologists. Much of the socio-cultural research that does exist tends to focus on young women's participation in what may be considered traditionally masculine activities such as ice hockey (e.g., Theberge, 2003).

### **Neoliberalism, Post-feminism, and Girl Culture**

Neoliberalism and post-feminism are fundamental concepts which help to guide this study. Neoliberalism is a mode of political and economic rationality that promotes personal responsibility, privatization, and free markets, while working to limit government interference by defunding social services (Chen, 2013; Gill, & Scharff, 2011; Tasker & Negra, 2007). According to Chen (2013), neoliberalism was created in the postwar years to push back against Keynesian state planning. It later became policy in the West during the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and 1980 election of Ronald Reagan in the USA.

Under neoliberal ideology, there is a belief that individuals are free, rational, and capable of endless self-improvement (Rose, 1990). Neoliberalism posits that people are in charge of their fate (Baker, 2010). Although this may seem to be an empowering notion, in reality it necessitates that individuals are held responsible for their failures and successes regardless of the constraints placed on them (Walkerdine et al., 2001 as cited in Gill, 2008 p. 436). The expectation is that people will manage to not only survive under neoliberalism, but that, without any support, they will thrive (Cooper, 2013). Of course, this expectation is unrealistic and fails to acknowledge structural barriers that most people face.

Closely related to neoliberalism is the ideology of post-feminism (Gill, 2008). Post-feminism is complex, and consequently, a variety of different definitions exist. Butler (2013) identifies three main definitions for post-feminism: post-feminism is either seen as a unified

linear movement, a backlash against feminism, or a sex-positive movement. Butler goes on to argue that all three of these public discourses are insufficient because none are entirely accurate. First, since feminism has never been a linear and monolithic movement, post-feminism should not be expected to be as such. Second, post-feminism cannot be described as a mere backlash towards feminism, since post-feminism is complex, paradoxical, and often draws on feminist vocabulary. Third, considering post-feminism as sex-positive inaccurately portrays feminism as being anti-sex. Having clarified what post-feminism is not, this discussion now turns to some characteristics of post-feminism.

Post-feminism can be seen as existing within the larger context of neoliberalism (Jolles, 2012; Pomerantz & Raby, 2007). Post-feminism suggests that gender equality has been achieved and thus feminism is no longer needed (Butler, 2013; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). Based on ideas of individual responsibility, post-feminism suggests that girls are responsible for their own successes and failures (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). While post-feminism suggests there is no longer a need for political or social change, it is simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal norms (McRobbie, 2009).

Neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies work together to create an unrealistic notion that females are the ideal citizens, symbolic of success in the modern world (Fraser, 2009). Known as “alpha girls” (Kindlon, 2006), “perfect girls” (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009), and “supergirls” (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008), there are countless narratives which suggest that young women are the true benefactors of neoliberalism and post-feminism. The post-feminist “successful girls” are painted as balancing masculinity with femininity to achieve success (Bettis & Adams, 2006; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Opposite to the traditional images of women as passive and powerless, these young women are constructed as confident, autonomous, and freely



choosing (Gill & Scharff, 2011). But as Raby and Pomerantz (2013) note, while these narratives suggest that girls are living in a world of gender equality, the reality is much more complex. Throughout this thesis, I will show that neoliberalism and post-feminism are social constructs which are negatively impacting the lives of girls.

### **Sport and the Construction of Gender Ideals**

Sport has a level of prestige due to its historical associations with hegemonic masculinity and it is considered an essential social institution in which gender dynamics can be reproduced or resisted (Grindstaff, & West, 2006). This makes sport a potential area for transforming restrictive gender norms in people's everyday lives. Unfortunately, this potential is not being met, as sports are still considered second only to the military as being a powerful, male-identified institution in which men can demonstrate their power and privilege (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005).

In post-feminist culture, sport is regarded as an ideal activity which can help teach girls valuable skills which they can use to improve their lives (Chawansky, 2012). The new ideal girl embodies masculine and feminine traits (Bettis & Adams, 2006; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) and is athletic and stays active (Bettis, Ferry, & Roe, 2016). Female athleticism is increasingly being normalized (Ezzell, 2009; Malcom, 2003; Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). Many female athletes embrace qualities of aggressiveness and competitiveness required in many sports (Broad, 2001; Chase, 2006; Ezzell, 2009). Ezzell (2009) summarized the new feminine ideal as a femininity that is a combination of being feminine, tough, fit, while maintaining heterosexual traits. Ezzell termed this new femininity "heterosexy-fit."

In recent decades, young girls have been encouraged to adopt masculine traits in order to prove that they can succeed in a patriarchal world (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004). Many parents show a preference for facilitating their sons' and daughters' participation in masculine, as

opposed to aesthetic, sports (Friedman, 2013) – here defined as sports which emphasize appearance and creativity as opposed to aggressiveness and competition (e.g. dance, gymnastics, cheerleading, and figure skating). On the other hand, parents are less lenient in relation to gender non-conforming behaviors in their sons, as opposed to their daughters; usually due to fear that feminine boys are much more susceptible to bullying (Kane, 2006). Furthermore, male participation in aesthetic sports is still less acceptable (Riemer & Visio, 2003; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006) – perhaps due to parental fear that this association is equated with homosexuality.

An examination of the literature reveals that aesthetic sports are highly stigmatized. Schmalz and Kerstetter (2006) found that boys that are high in stigma consciousness are more likely to avoid participating in aesthetic sports. Similarly, men who are not able to fully live up to the masculinity associated with being strong and aggressive often face ridicule from their peers (Roth, 2004). Surprisingly, however, Schmalz and Kerstetter (2006) found that girls high in stigma consciousness were also less likely to be involved in aesthetic sports. Their findings showed a significant correlation in relation to participation in dance, gymnastics, and ballet. The authors posit that since masculine sports have a high status among their peers, boys and girls who are highly aware of stigmas may avoid participation in more femininely-perceived activities.

There is widespread contempt for all things considered “girlish,” as well as sexist and homophobic beliefs, which suggests that anything girlish is bad or gay (Pomerantz, 2013). A common misconception that masculine traits are more appropriate for sport has resulted in many girls adopting a masculine ethos in sport. As Eliasson (2011) notes, there is an underlying assumption that the masculine performance of gender is more appropriate for sporting play. As a

result of this assumption, Eliasson found that both boys and girls tend to believe males are inherently better at sport. Furthermore, the association between sport and masculinity is so high that many girls have internalized the idea that they are infringing upon boys' space when entering a sport (Clark & Paechter, 2007). For example, girls are more likely to ask permission from boys before joining an open game at recess.

### **The Personal is Political**

During my master's coursework, I became troubled when reading literature that suggested that women feel pressure to present themselves as feminine when they cross gender norms (e.g. Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009). As a female whose sporting life revolved around what may be classified as aesthetic sports, I have always felt that the Western norm was overly masculine and androgynous. In fact, I often felt I had to present myself as more masculine to gain acceptance.

A particular article which caught my attention was by Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly (2004), that examined girls who skateboard. The article investigated the ways in which the skateboarding girls were covertly engaging in a form of feminist politics by resisting acts of emphasized femininity. Although the article resonated with me in some ways, I did not find it representative of my lived experiences. In particular, I found the skater girls' judgments of the "bun girls" (p. 553), girls whom they viewed as hyper-feminine, to be slightly offensive. My reason for being offended was that I am almost certain I would have been labeled as one such "bun girl."

When the skater girls in Pomerantz et al.'s (2004) article described the "bun girls" as "ditzy" (p. 553) and obsessed with their appearance, I imagine they would have seen me the same way. Similar to many young women, I was exceptionally insecure and hyper-focused on

my appearance during adolescence. Although I was hyper-feminine, I never felt empowered by this hyper-femininity. It was a comfortable identity that felt natural to me and I have always felt more pressure to disguise my femininity than I have felt pressure to enhance it.

This topic matters to me personally because, through time, I now realize that many of the traits I value, such as sensitivity, expressiveness, creativity, and other feminine traits, were looked down upon. Although I consider myself to have adopted more ‘masculine’ traits (e.g., assertiveness and confidence), I still highly value ‘feminine’ traits (e.g., empathy and gracefulness). I have always seen a particular strength in femininity. Due to the fact that I was always participating in aesthetic sports, my experiences were different than the experiences of female athletes in predominately masculine sports that I have read about in the literature. I believe there is a need for research to examine the feminine aspects and value of sport, as it may offer women similar to myself an opportunity to share their experiences.

My interest in doing this research stems from my belief that femininity and feminine sport are under-appreciated. I am deeply committed to increasing the visibility of voices of girls in aesthetic sports. This research aims to look at aesthetic sports from a feminist perspective that values feminine traits and female agency. Only by hearing first-hand accounts of girls’ perspectives can we begin to understand how to ensure equity in young women’s sporting lives.

### **Defining Traditionally Feminine and Masculine Sports**

North American team sports emerged in the late 1800s, during a time when essentialist understandings of gender constructed women as inherently feminine and unsuited to engage in sport (Musto & McGann, 2016). More recently, female athleticism is increasingly being normalized due to significant increase in female sport participation (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Riemer & Visio, 2003). In 1965, Metheny (as cited in Hannon, Soohoo, Reel, & Ratliffe, 2009)

classified sports as those that are “acceptable” versus “unacceptable” for women. According to Metheny, acceptable sports included individual activities with a focus on aesthetics and accuracy, but not strength. Sports involving bodily contact, strength, aggression, and face-to-face competition were considered unacceptable. Colley et al. 1987 (as cited in Ross & Shinew, 2008) found that individual sports (i.e., figure skating, gymnastics, golf, and tennis) are found to be more suitable for women than competitive sports.

Building on Metheny’s work, Koivula (2001) argued that sports should be categorized as gender-neutral, feminine, or masculine based on features such as femininity and aesthetics, masculinity and speed, and as danger and risk. Koivula's study supported previous findings that sports labeled as feminine tend to be those in which women are able to enact appropriately feminine (graceful, non-aggressive) behaviors, while simultaneously providing beauty and aesthetic pleasure. Koivula found that sports perceived as feminine were seen to be based on philosophies of cooperation, participation, and play. These findings are strengthened by McCallister et al.’s (2003) study in which they interviewed girls in elementary school to examine their perceptions of different sports. The girls in this study labeled cheerleading, dance, ballet, gymnastics, and, less frequently, figure skating as among the most aesthetic sports.

According to Guarino (2015), what separates aesthetic sports from more masculine sports is an intermingling of art and athletics. For example, dancers move their bodies in physically impressive and athletic ways, but they also have a creative intention behind these movements. Guarino also added that just like in art, aesthetic sports do not always have a “winner” and a “loser.” Excluding competitions, many of the aesthetic sport performances are designed to entertain an audience.

## **Aim of the Study and Significance**

While the importance and scope of girls' sport participation has been a topic of research, to date, few researchers have explored the experiences of girls in traditionally aesthetic sports. In particular, little attention is paid to the ways in which the changing girl culture under neoliberalism and post-feminism have shaped the experiences of girls in sport. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature as well as the social and cultural context in which girls' sport participation occurs.

Drawing upon insights from literature surrounding girlhood and post-feminist discourse, the purpose of this feminist research was to understand the lived experiences of adolescent females currently participating in aesthetic sports. Specifically, I aimed to critically examine the ways in which the new feminine ideal and a post-feminist girl culture shape girls' experiences. For the purpose of this paper, aesthetic sports will be those which Metheny (1965) and Koivula (2001) termed acceptable, and also contain elements of performativity and art (Guarino, 2015). These sports include dance, gymnastics, cheerleading, and figure skating. The sports that Metheny has termed unacceptable, as well as those that are based around competing to win (Guarino, 2015), will be referred to as masculine sports and include all competitive team sports requiring strength and physical contact.

To ensure elements of homogeneity, all participants identified as girls between the ages of 12-15 who are currently enrolled in one or more feminine sport(s). Using the Developmental Model of Sport Participation, as outlined by Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2016), the chosen age group falls within the category of recreational participation through sampling. According to the authors, the sampling years are an introduction to sport that precedes the later stratification into either recreational or elite participation. The sampling years are often characterized by

recreational, structured activities, which are adapted to meet individual interests. The flexibility of this category allows for participants to be included regardless of whether they engage in aesthetic sports at recreational or elite levels in the future.

The study was guided by the following major research questions:

- i. What are the experiences (e.g. motivations, enjoyment, challenges) of young women enrolled in aesthetic sports?
- ii. How do young women in aesthetic sports describe the negotiation of their sense of self (e.g., gender identity and expression) as it relates to the sporting context?
- iii. How do young women think others perceive them (with regards to their sport participation) within the context of post-feminist discourse?
- iv. How do the girls' sporting identities in traditionally aesthetic sports transcend into their identity outside of the sport domain?

In summary, the current sporting culture is different from the sporting culture of the past, and there is evidence to suggest that aesthetic sports may be stigmatized as a result. While such sports have always been stigmatized, the post-feminist culture has created new forms of stigmatization. To date, minimal research has extended the connection of the new feminine ideal and a post-feminist culture to the area of aesthetic sports. This study seeks to address that gap by understanding how these concepts have shaped the lived experiences of girls in aesthetic sports.

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Perspective**

### **Social constructionism**

Contemporary scholars often use the term “social construction” to refer to norms that are seen to be objectively true, when in fact, they are socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Mercadal, 2014). In the past half century, qualitative researchers have increasingly focused on the social construction of everyday realities (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). According to Burr (2015), social constructionism is anti-essentialist and rejects the idea that there is an apparent or discoverable human nature. Social constructionism rejects the notion of truth. Rather than assuming that knowledge comes from an objective reality, it assumes that knowledge is invented and entrenched among people, structures, and social institutions. As Mercadal (2017) states, social constructionists believe that truth and knowledge, rather than being inherent and discoverable by the human mind, are created. Social constructionism is especially useful for examining sport because sport is a key arena in which social realities are constructed (Messner, 1988; Messner, 2011).

Social constructionists, while accepting that an objective reality exists, also acknowledge that there is no absolute truth (Andrews, 2012). In essence, they recognize multiple realities. Social constructionists are thus concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood. According to Mercadal (2017), social constructionists aim to understand subjective human experiences, while simultaneously creating an objective interpretation of the events under study. According to Burr (2015), all social constructionist work follows some key assumptions. First, social constructionism is based on taking a critical stance towards common assumptions about the world and ourselves. Second, social constructionism posits that all ways of understanding are both produced by and products of the particular cultural and historical periods in which they



exist. As a result, social constructionists do not assume that their way or thinking is better or more truthful than the ways of others. Third, social constructionists believe that knowledge is constructed via everyday interactions between people. Fourth, social constructionists believe that social actions change in accordance to changes in knowledge. For example, behaviors are dealt with differently across time and culture depending on whether they are seen to be appropriate or not. Social constructionism is thus in opposition to positivism and empiricism, two epistemological positions that assume truth can be revealed through observation (Burr, 2015).

Mercadal (2017) points out that social constructionism can be radical or contextual. The author notes that unlike radical social constructionism, contextual social constructionism does accept objective reality. Contextual social constructionists thus acknowledge the multiplicity of truths that stem from individuals' developing various and multiple subjective meanings of their experiences. Andrews (2012) notes that social constructionists, while accepting reality, also acknowledge that there is no absolute truth. In essence, they recognize multiple realities. Social constructionists are thus concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood. Social constructionists aim to understand subjective human experiences while simultaneously creating an objective interpretation of the events under study (Mercadal, 2017).

According to Mercadal (2017), social constructionists believe that all knowledge is constructed and thus their focus lies in examining the way knowledge is created and shared. Mercadal states that constructionists view communication as the most important way to create, share, and sustain a subjective reality. Thus, as Mercadal notes, subjective reality is built on beliefs and notions shared through communication. Over time these common beliefs and meanings appear to be an objective truth or norm. As a result of these convictions, social constructionists aim to understand participants' understandings of terms, situations, and events to

understand the participants' implicit views and assumptions (Charmaz, 2006). One way to achieve this aim is to rely on participant views and create questions that are open-ended and general so participants can construct their own meanings (Creswell, 2013).

There are two key forms of social constructionist theories as outlined by Burr (2015). The first type is termed micro social constructionism. Micro social constructionism focuses on microstructures and addresses everyday language used in interactions between people. Micro social constructionism assumes that daily social interactions are socially constructed. As a result, multiple versions of the world exist and all of these versions are equally legitimate. Continuing on, Burr states that peoples' descriptions of the world is the only reality that is accessible to us. The aforementioned points undermine all claims of truth. The second type of social constructionism also as outlined by Burr is macro social constructionism. Macro social constructionism addresses larger linguistic and social structures. Although macros social constructionism acknowledges the importance of language in social construction, it assumes language is linked to social structures and institutionalized practices. As noted by Burr, micro and macro social constructionism can be used separately or in tandem with each other.

## **Feminism**

Feminism forms a vital part of the theoretical lens for this project. Within leisure research, the four primary feminist perspectives are: liberal, socialist, radical, and Marxist (Henderson et al., 1996). According to Issitt (2016), liberal feminists consider gender equality to be a result of historical traditions, which have prevented women from advancing equally to men. Individual rights, equal opportunity, and the eradication of oppressive educational and legal barriers are key focuses of liberal feminists. Issitt claims that socialist feminists argue that women's oppression is a result of capitalism and patriarchy. According to Issitt, radical feminists

argue that patriarchy is the main cause of women's oppression. Radical feminists posit that gender inequality exists due to the fact that men hold assert power over women's bodies. Unlike liberal feminists who believe current institutions can be reformed, radical feminists assert that gender equality cannot be achieved within the current system since current systems are founded on patriarchy. Henderson et al. (1996) posit that Marxist feminists claim capitalism, not patriarchy, is the cause of women's oppression. Marxist feminists focus on women's oppression as it relates to domestic and reproductive affairs.

Feminist research takes multiple forms, and thus cannot be defined by one theory methodology, or method (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Feminist research is interdisciplinary by nature (Tong, 2014) and it comes in multiple, dynamic, and diverse forms (Olesen, 2011). However, there are key concepts that unify feminist theory. Three keys feminist principles are used to guide this research. First, feminism seeks to transform patriarchal society and culture (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Feminists do not believe that a person's biological sex determines their identity (Tarrant, 2013). Second, feminism seeks to explore the ways in which gender and power shape women's lives (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). This research values women and acknowledges that women are the experts of their own lives (DeVault & Gross, 2012). Third, feminist research is meant to be a form of activism and social justice (Brisolara, Seigart, and SenGupta, 2014; Parry, 2014).

Like many North American feminist leisure scholars, this study uses a critical social constructionist lens (Henderson & Shaw, 2006). Feminism is connected to social constructionism in that the two theoretical perspectives share many commonalities. According to Brisolara, Seigart, and SenGupta (2014), feminist research follows several key premises which include: first, the idea that knowledge is contingent upon the time, place, and the social context in which

it was created; second, researchers are in a position of power in which they can use participants' knowledge to serve implicit or explicit purposes; thus they must act ethically; third, researchers and the methodologies they use are embedded with political perspectives, positions, and biases; fourth, research practices are social constructs which have been influenced by the dominant ideologies; fifth and finally, feminist researchers should resist the urge to privilege certain ways of knowing (logic) over others (intuition). These premises support social constructionist questioning of everyday knowledge as well as their notion that there are multiple, competing, and changing perspectives about what is true (Kretchmar, 2015).

Feminist constructionists acknowledge multiple oppressions exist and thus they aim to include diversity and difference in their research (Freysinger et al., 2013). Burr (2015) illustrates the social constructionist viewpoint using the example of gender and sex. Our observations of the world lead us to believe that we can categorize people in being "men" or "women" based on biological differences. However, social constructionists note the ambiguity of such observations. Social constructionists would point to examples, such as gender reassignment surgeries to make explicit that fact that categories which initially appear to be natural are often in fact products of culture. What we understand as being natural or real is culturally and historically specific and changes over time. The idea of masculinity and femininity are so embedded in our culture that most people build their identities around them. And yet, the notion of what it means to be a man or women changes with time and place.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to gender equity by shedding light on a research topic that has largely been ignored within the youth sport context. This aligns well with feminism as well as critical social constructionism. Since our constructions of the world work to sustain and exclude patterns of social action, our constructions are therefore always tied

to power relations (Burr, 2015). According to Freysinger et al. (2013), in addition to analyzing how dominant discourses are produced, critical constructionism can be used to analyze how these dominant discourses are negotiated and reconstructed. As a result of social constructionists' acknowledgment that individuals work together to construct their worlds, constructionists believe that dominant discourses can be challenged and resisted by collective, as well as, individual action. According to Freysinger et al. (2013), through its argument for female empowerment, gender equality, and social change, feminist research is a form of activism.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity**

This study will explore gender domination from a perspective based on the premise that in addition to gender inequality, feminine traits are also being devalued. Gender plays a significant role in all people's lives (Tarrant, 2013). Nearly three decades ago, West and Zimmerman (1987) developed the "doing gender" thesis and posited that gender is neither a set of biological traits, nor a social role. Instead, they argued that hierarchal relations between men and women are reinforced by the ideological concept of gender. Individuals are judged on their ability to follow these normative standards. Deutsch (2007) acknowledged the importance of West and Zimmerman's work, but felt a linguistic change was needed since the phrase "doing gender" will shift people's thoughts to the accomplishment of gender difference instead of dismantling the difference. Deutsch therefore argued that we need to shift our focus away from ways in which we "do gender" and look for ways in which we can undo gender.

In particular, this study looks at the ways femininity is viewed as inferior to masculinity. According to Schippers (2007), the relationship between men and women is constructed as hierarchal and complementary. The author claims that masculinity often involves characteristics, such as authority, physical strength, and the ability to use violence. The author states that these

characteristics also help ensure men's domination of the supposedly inferior feminine qualities of compliance, vulnerability, and inability to be violent. Masculinity is also based on heterosexual desire (Anderson, 2002; Connell, 1987; Fejes, 2000; Garlick, 2003). Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally idealized qualities of masculinity that work to establish a hierarchical relationship between men and women (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity works to ensure men's domination and women's subordination.

Schippers (2007) argues that since hegemonic gender relations are dependent on men being different from and superior to women, the characteristics that define hegemonic masculinity must remain unavailable to women. As a result, women who embody these characteristics are stigmatized and labeled as deviant yet feminine. Schippers terms these femininities pariah femininities. An example of a pariah femininity would be an authoritative woman or a woman who is sexually attracted to other women. Instead of being seen as masculine, these women are saddled with derogatory terms such as "bitch" or "dyke."

As stated previously, the newly empowered, autonomous, and confident femininities of the twenty-first century now consist of traditionally feminine and masculine qualities (Budgeon, 2014; Gonick, 2004). This new femininity would at first seem to contradict Schippers' (2007) argument that females cannot adopt masculine traits without being labeled as deviant. However, these new femininities are neither labeled deviant, nor symbolic of restructured gender norms. These new femininities are instead viewed as progressive, and yet feminine (McRobbie, 2009).

In sum, a critical form of social constructionism, as well as feminism, are used as the guiding theoretical perspectives for this research. While neoliberal and post-feminist discourse suggest that gender equality has been achieved, this thesis will challenge this assumption. In fact,

neoliberalism and post-feminism are social constructs, and their assertions of gender equality are a façade.

### **Chapter Three: Literature Review**

This study draws on the key concepts of a neoliberal, post-feminist culture as well as existing research on young women's sport participation. The first section of this chapter will outline previous research on the identities taken up by young girls that have been identified by researchers. The second part of this chapter will illuminate the contradictory discourses that limit the subversive potential of women in sport to change essentialist beliefs. The third section of this chapter will illustrate the current girl culture in which girls are judgmental of themselves and others. Within this context, previous research highlighting the complexities of girlhood culture, stigmatization, and young women's sport participation will be discussed.

#### **Identities in Flux: Tomboys, Girlie Girls, and the New Feminine Ideal**

As mentioned in chapter one, gender is not an innate trait, but is, rather, performative (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This is not to imply that individuals can perform gender freely. By contrast, males and females are socialized to conform to their prescribed gender (Messner, 2000). Furthermore, society has positive and negative sanctions used to show approval or disapproval for behaviors (Henslin, Glenday, Duffy, & Pupo, 2007). It must be noted that differing gender performances are assigned different values; particularly, masculinity is given a higher status than femininity (Connell, 1987; Reay, 2001; Schippers, 2007). In the section that follows, the identities of tomboys, girlie girls, and the new feminine ideal will be examined in order to demonstrate the devaluation of traditionally feminine traits. It will be argued that girls have incentives to adopt masculine traits; nevertheless, girls who adopt masculine traits are still constrained by their identity as a female. Furthermore, although a girl may receive an increase in status for adopting masculine traits, the status of girls as a whole may remain devalued.



The tomboy identity, while offering many benefits, also offers many challenges to girls. Moreover, the identity does not disrupt gender norms. Mannay (2013) defines tomboys as females who display masculine-typical behaviors and are seen to enjoy sport. Holland and Harpin (2013) noted that there are many advantages to being a tomboy. For example, tomboys are granted more bodily agency than girlie girls and can wear comfortable clothing that allows them to play sport. Craig and Lacroix (2011) argued that the tomboy identity can protect a girl's sexual reputation and offer her entry into a masculine space. Although the tomboy identity provides some protection to girls, it also presents them with additional challenges. Girls who are deemed overly masculine are at high risk of being ostracized by their peers (Jeanes, 2011). For example, females who embody characteristics labeled as masculine are often called derogatory terms, such as "bitch" or "dyke" (Schippers, 2007). As Craig and Lacroix (2011) argued, although being a tomboy comes with some advantages over being a feminine girl, it is nevertheless a less privileged position than being a boy.

Current literature seems to suggest that traditional hyper-femininity, as found in the girlie-girl identity has become stigmatized. In contrast to the tomboy, a girlie-girl is seen to be hyper-feminine, passive, and overly focused on her appearance (Holland & Harpin, 2013). Many girls devalue those whom they perceive to be girlie-girls (Krane et al., 2014). According to Holland and Harpin (2013), a defining feature of the girlie-girl seems to be that she is someone who most girls do not want to be. In a study that was originally intended to focus on tomboys, Holland and Harpin were intrigued by their participants' continuous use of the term girlie-girl. In fact, the girlie-girl was so infamous as an object of desire, as well as resentment, that the authors began to believe that the girlie-girl seemed to be more of cultural figure than a livable identity. Many athletes involved in sports based on alternative forms of femininity show a dislike of

girlie-girls (Ezzell, 2009; Finley, 2010). For example, female roller derby participants in Finley's (2010) study showed a contemptuous attitude towards women who embodied emphasized femininity and stereotyped girlie women as being gossipy, self-absorbed, critical, and aiming only to please men.

Although girls may still use feminine markers, these markers are used, not to emphasize femininity, but rather, to display a heterosexual appearance. Hendley and Bielby (2012) examined female soccer players and found that the colour pink offered significant insight into girls' relationship with femininity. For example, the younger girls often rejected wearing the colour pink, something they deemed girlie, due to its associations with traditional femininity, which they viewed as being equated with weakness. In their attempt to project a mature appearance, the girls rejected the girlie image for a more sexualized appearance. Contrasting this, the older girls in the study tended to show a preference for pink clothing as it signaled heterosexuality. It is important to note that neither group wore pink to signal femininity. The older girls used feminine markers to display a heterosexual appearance. This does not imply that they valued feminine qualities, rather it suggests that they are resisting stigma surrounding the sexuality of female athletes.

The new feminine ideal is based on notions of girl power, and thus it allows girls to embrace their masculine traits. Nevertheless, girls are still highly focused on appearance. The modern ideal girl embodies masculine and feminine traits (Bettis & Adams, 2006) and is athletic and stays active (Bettis, Ferry, & Roe, 2016). However, the new feminine ideal offers a contradictory discourse in that, although girls now embrace more masculine traits, there is an increasing focus on appearance. Originally women in sport were found to engage in an apologetic defense by exaggerating their femininity to apologize for their success in the

masculine domain (Eitzen, 1999; Hill, 2013). More recently, literature has emerged suggesting female athletes no longer feel the need to downplay their athleticism so long as they embody traits of a heterosexual, feminine woman (Ezzell, 2009; Festle as cited in Adams, Schmitke, Franklin, Women, & Summer, 2005; Jeanes, 2011). Several studies have documented that while females embrace masculine characteristics of physical strength and skill, they often simultaneously want a feminine appearance (Markula 1995; Collins, 2002; Loland, 2000; McDermott, 2000). Given the above findings, it is unsurprising that many female athletes desire a strong and muscular body to succeed in sport while simultaneously wanting a more traditional feminine appearance outside of sport (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Women are caught in a double-bind in which they need to embrace masculine qualities while always remaining sexually desirable and feminine enough (Washington & Economides, 2016).

Regardless of which identity girls choose, gender roles continue to be restrictive. Although girls are more accepting of their strong identities, there is evidence that girls now face stigma when they are not able to live up to the athletic standards. Krane et al. (2014) found that girls often perform their athletic identity without fear of being stigmatized. Many of the girls from Krane's study spoke openly about their focus, determination, competition, and aggressiveness without any hint of shame. In fact, mental toughness was admired and being mentally weak was seen as unacceptable. Similarly, in a study of girls' recreational softball, Malcom (2003) found that girls were not worried about being teased for being too masculine. Rather, many girls believed that a girl was most likely to be teased if she was a bad athlete. Thus, the girl baseball players in Malcom's study were highly concerned with appearing as a skilled athlete. These same girls were highly aware of the fact that incompetent athletes were likely to face stigma. One girl baseball player in Malcom's (2003) study showed sympathy for a "small"

girl in her class who was bullied for her inability to kick a soccer ball far enough. Thus, it seems that girls may fully embrace the masculine aspects of sport.

### **Throwing like a Girl versus Playing like a Boy**

The following section demonstrates that women's entry into sports has not resulted in gender equity. Messner (1988) claims that women's increased involvement in sport represents a challenge to the "ideological basis of male domination" (p. 198). Messner argues that although women's entry in sport accounts for a genuine quest for equality by women, the quest is rife with ambiguities and contradictions. According to Messner, the potential of female athletes to resist male hegemony in sport is subverted, in part, by beliefs about inherent physiological differences between men and women as well as by media representations of female athletes. Adding to the above, many women's sports are gender marked and thus, do not disrupt gendered hierarchies as much as they otherwise might (Finley, 2010). There are often differing rules and regulations for women's sports to accommodate women's perceived inferior physicality (George, 2005; Theberge, 1997; Wachs, 2002). Since male versions of sports are often perceived as being the standard and more legitimate version, the transformative potential of women in sport is lessened (Theberge, 1997).

Sports that might initially seem to be promoting equality may perpetuate gender norms. Rosdahl (2014) complicated the idea that females in masculine sports work to break gender norms in a study that examined female athletes in the sport of body-sculpting. Rosdahl acknowledged that female bodybuilders problematize myths about feminine fragility. However, the author pointed out that men and women are judged differently in body-sculpting competitions. For example, males are judged purely by their overall muscularity. Males are not judged on their masculinity. Contrary to this, females are trained to emphasize their femininity

and perform hypersexualized, submissive, and feminine postures. Unlike males, females can be penalized for appearing overly muscular since it is seen to be unfeminine. Washington and Economides (2016) echoed these findings and reported that the discourse of Cross Fit is based more on attractiveness than strength and fitness.

Although this study does not directly examine young men's experiences, it is important to note that boys may also face stigmatization for the performance of what may be seen as feminine traits. Males participating in aesthetic sports is still less acceptable (Riemer & Visio, 2003; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). Men who do not appear masculine or aggressive enough often face ridicule from their peers (Ross, 2004). Boys and girls sometimes bully boys whom they perceive to be overly feminine (Mannay, 2013). Unsurprisingly, males in aesthetic sports have to carefully construct their image to avoid stigmatization. For example, in a study of competitive coed cheerleading in the United States, Grindstaff and West (2006) revealed that male cheerleaders confront heightened homophobia, and were under constant pressure to carefully construct their image for acceptance. Since the performance demands of cheerleading conflict with the cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity, male cheerleaders often engage in impression management. For example, many men flaunted their masculinity through activities, such as weightlifting, and avoided the stereotypically feminine act of smiling. In sum, males who fail to conform to a hyper-masculine ideal are susceptible to stigma and bullying.

Even academic literature seems to prescribe different meanings to behaviors based on the context of whether it is seen as masculine or feminine. Previous research examining girls in sport has found that the qualities of focus, determination, hard work, and tolerating pain are given different meanings based on whether the study is focusing on masculine versus aesthetic sports. For example, girls participating in masculine sports are said to be resisting gender norms when

they act in self-assured, focused, determined, and aggressive ways (Krane, Ross, Barak, Lucas-Carr, & Robinson, 2014). In contrast, when the same concepts were examined in relation to aesthetic sports, these same qualities of focus and determination are considered to be examples of girls' conforming to gender norms. For example, ballet has been criticized for its authoritarian teaching style in which dancers are trained to tolerate pain with grace (e.g., Evans et al. 2007). Likewise, girls in cheerleading are seen to have little room for individual creative expression due to the heavily orchestrated, controlled, organized, and disciplined nature of the activity (Adams & Bettis, 2003).

In conclusion, women's entry into masculine sports is not disrupting gender hierarchies. As Craig and Lacroix (2011) noted, females who excel in sport are seen to be exceptions to feminine weakness. Adding to this, Holland and Harpin (2013) pointed out that although the tomboy identity is often thought of as a willingness to be aligned with masculinity, it may, in fact, have more to do with a desire to be aligned with the physical agency that males are allotted. The benefits granted to girls who adopt masculine traits does little, if anything, to disrupt gender hierarchies and the message remains clear- unless women adopt masculine traits, they must be excluded from the masculine sphere (Craig & Lacroix, 2011). These points lead to an important question: How can gender equality be achieved when traits traditionally associated with females are viewed as inferior?

### **Regulatory Gaze**

As is evident from the previous section, the new feminine ideal in sport, although different from the traditional feminine ideal, is still highly restrictive. This section focuses on the mechanisms of surveillance that are present in girls' social worlds. Regardless of whether women's bodies are being condemned or celebrated, women's bodies are always under

supervision in the media (Winch, 2012). In post-feminist culture, girls can gain power through having a hypersexual and attractive appearance (Charles, 2012), and appearance is the key to recognition (Riley, Evans, & Mackiewicz, 2016). Unsurprisingly, when asked to rate the importance of various characteristics as they relate to sport, girls are significantly more likely than boys to rate appearance as being highly significant (Klomsten, Marsh, & Skaalvik, 2005). Furthermore, Rossing, Ronglan, and Scott (2014) noted that within Western culture, the body has become evidence of one's successfulness within health discourses. If a woman fails to succeed in achieving a stereotypically attractive outward appearance, she will be accused of not doing the work necessary to achieve the desired body (Rossing, Ronglan, & Scott, 2014; Winch, 2012).

The female gaze has become a fundamental source of regulation within girl culture (Winch, 2012; Riley, Evans, & Mackiewicz, 2016). Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz (2016) called females watching other females the "post-feminist gaze" (p. 95). The authors claimed that the post-feminist gaze is pervasive, judgmental, and consumption-oriented. Furthermore, women judge each other and themselves on their ability to successfully re-create a hyper-feminine appearance using whatever time, skills, and money is necessary. Girls are monitoring, not only their bodies, but also the bodies of other females (Jeanes, 2011).

Winch (2012) examined girls' friendship groups and found that popular media, such as women's fitness magazines, promoted self-policing among girls. Women's friendships are then used to mutually police each other in their quest to achieve the ideal body. As Winch noted, there is a sense of solidarity in working with friends to obtain an ideal appearance. This leads to women's body-hatred and turns women into people who are obsessed with appearance. Winch claimed that women have appropriated misogynistic, and previously abusive, words to describe their bodies. For example, many women use the term "bingo wings" to describe fat under their

arms. Winch pointed to the increase in social media as a part of the problem. Illustrating this, the author argued that social media requires one always to present their best self to others, and having friends thus becomes a source of social capital. However, Winch pointed out the constant surveillance has led to an increasing competitiveness among women as they are forced to judge themselves based on increasingly complex standards.

Due to the competition inherent in patriarchy, many women feel isolated and threatened by other women (Finley, 2010). In a study of female rugby players, Ezzell (2009) found that women engage in practices of “defensive othering” whereby they accept the perceived superiority of a dominant group and aim to distance themselves from the inferiority associated with their group by labeling themselves as an exception. The female rugby players in Ezzell’s study distanced themselves from their subordinated status of both women and overly masculine or lesbian. Through embodying heterosexy traits, the rugby players accomplished two things. First, they used their athleticism to distance themselves from hyper-feminine women whom they viewed as weak. Second, they used their sexual appearance to distance themselves from the masculine and lesbian identities. Many girls distance themselves from femininity to resist sexualization, victimization, and subordination (Henriksen, 2015). Women also sometimes distance themselves from other women whom they view as competing for male attention (Ezzell, 2009).

Girls are increasingly expected to embody masculine traits. There is an increased sense of competitive individualism among girls, and many girls idealize actions that are outside of normative femininity (Hills, 2007). Peilichaty (2015) studied girl football players and found that a major concern for girls is how boys will perceive them. Peilichaty found that many girls seek male approval or aim to prove their worth to the boys. Females can appropriate masculine



behaviors as a means to establish power and status (Henriksen, 2015). Hills (2007) studied girls' experiences of all-girls physical education and found that in the absence of males, power issues based on masculine ideals still exist. Hills found that girls who were socially popular or physically skilled were the ones who have the authority to include and exclude others. Girls in Hills' study were highly aware that their performance during a sport could lead to either inclusion or exclusion and embarrassment. Moreover, girls with a lower level of physical skill often worried about being teased by other girls.

According to Finley (2010), intra-gender competition can, on one hand, resist the gender order by disassociating gender stereotypes with a particular gender. For example, when females accuse other females of "playing like a girl" it disassociates the behavior from women. On the other hand, Finley admitted that if the new and alternative femininities are still based upon male dominance, then they may not disrupt relations between the genders. Although girls may be praised for adopting masculine traits such as confidence and assertiveness, they are judged more harshly than boys are judged for breaking rules (Mannay, 2013). At the same time, girls often dislike and place sanctions on any girl who fails to embody the niceness and humility that is associated with femininity (Clark & Paechter, 2007). Furthermore, girls who play sports are often labeled as either being like a boy or as seeking male attention (Clark & Paechter, 2007). In sum, girls are open to judgment regardless of which behavior they choose. As a result of the contradictory and confusing messages, girls may have to devote significant time and energy to navigate the landscape of sport.

## **Summary**

It is evident from this literature review that performing gender in post-feminist girl culture is complex and difficult. The new feminine ideal has been shown to be highly restrictive

and exclusionary. This chapter has revealed that sexism and hegemonic masculinity continue to remain pervasive in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, few leisure scholars have researched gender and sport through the lens of post-feminist girl culture (Chawansky, 2012). Since making a group invisible makes it easier for those in power to do what they want against them (Kleinman, 2013), this is a social justice issue. This study contributes to a new perspective by focusing on girls' participation in feminine sport from a social constructionist and feminist lens that problematizes commonly held sexist assumptions about aesthetic sports.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology and research strategies. It will begin with an overview of constructionist grounded theory. Following this, I will identify my research strategies. As outlined in chapter one, the purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of adolescent females currently participating in aesthetic sports. Specifically, I explored the ways in which the new feminine ideal and a post-feminist discourse shape young women's experiences. The study is framed by the following research questions:

- i. What are the experiences (e.g. motivations, enjoyment, challenges) of young women enrolled in aesthetic sports?
- ii. How do young women in aesthetic sports describe the development of their sense of self (e.g., gender identity and expression) as it relates to the sporting context?
- iii. How do young women think others perceive them (with regards to their sport participation) within the context of post-feminist girl culture?
- iv. How do the girls' sporting identities in aesthetic sports transcend into their identity outside of the sport domain?

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research can be defined as research that includes several common characteristics. First, qualitative research begins with a theoretical or interpretive framework. Second, qualitative researchers collect data themselves, often in natural settings. Third, qualitative researchers use inductive and deductive logic in data analysis. Fourth, the qualitative research process is emergent, and thus the researcher is open to change. Fifth and finally, qualitative researchers are reflexive and provide a holistic account of the issue under study. A major benefit of qualitative research is that it is flexible and thus allows the researcher

to be open to new ideas from participants (Glesne, 2011). Qualitative researchers focus on understanding the detailed meanings that participants ascribe to their situation (Creswell, 2013).

### **Grounded Theory through a Constructionist Approach**

Grounded theory is a “general methodology, a way of thinking about and conceptualizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 163). The procedures involved in grounded theory include collecting data on a topic, analyzing the data, forming conceptual categories within the data, linking those categories to create a theory, and then collecting more data to test the theory (Glesne, 2011). In addition to using inductive analysis to create a theory grounded in the data, grounded theorists also prioritize constant comparative methods along with simultaneous data collection and analysis (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Grounded theory was first described by Glaser and Strauss in their influential book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). While it was initially practiced by sociologists, it was later adopted by a variety of researchers from varying disciplines (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Today, grounded theory is one of the most widely used methodologies (Birks & Mills, 2011; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). As grounded theory grew in popularity, the two originators diverged in their aims, principles, and procedures and ended up in stark conflict with one another (Evans, 2013). As a result, there are differing forms of grounded theory.

According to Charmaz (2006), two of the most common branches of grounded theory are ‘objectivist grounded theory,’ which is rooted in the positivist tradition and ‘constructionist grounded theory’ which is rooted in an interpretivist tradition. According to Charmaz, objectivist grounded theorists overlook social contexts and posit that researchers can remain unbiased in their analysis. On the other hand, Charmaz claims that constructionist grounded theory is an approach which acknowledges that data and data analysis are both constructed via shared

experiences and relationships between the researcher and participant. Charmaz claims that constructionists study why and how participants create the meanings they do. The reflexivity embedded within this methodology helps to shed light on the social construction of the data and data analysis.

Consistent with my feminist social constructionist lens, this project was guided by Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory through a constructionist approach. Constructionist grounded theory is congruent with social justice research (Levy, 2015). The main benefit of grounded theory is that it is flexible and offers a way for researchers to view an issue from both a broad and specific vantage point (Charmaz, 2006). This flexibility allowed me to ensure the research was conducted in a way that is consistent with social justice values. According to Creswell (2013), for research to meet the goals of social justice, the research procedure must emphasize an interpretive stance. Likewise, the researcher must acknowledge power imbalances as well as their own subjectivity. Constructionist grounded theory acknowledges that researchers and their participants help shape the research (Birks & Mills, 2011). Similarly, constructionist grounded theorists admit that the resultant theory of a study is a multidimensional interpretation, which has been co-constructed by the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006).

According to Levy (2015), since grounded theorists create theory that is grounded in the data, it is an ideal method for social justice researchers. Levy argues that it is the responsibility of the researcher to advocate for social justice and to strive to make a difference in the lives of participants. Levy claims that all stages of the research process, from creating questions to disseminating results, must be informed by social justice goals. Broadly speaking, Levy advocates that researchers respect their participants and remain aware of the ways they, themselves, are influencing the research process. Levy reminds researchers to recognize

intersectionality and to be aware that a researcher will never be a true insider. Rather, a researcher must remain aware of and present their subjectivities and give context when reporting findings. The next section will cover how reflexivity was used as a key method to ensure the research is in-line with my social justice goals.

## **Reflexivity**

Throughout the research process, I aimed to be continually reflexive while being mindful that all knowledge is socially constructed. Charmaz (2006) reminded us that an interview is “contextual and negotiated” (p 27). By this, Charmaz meant to say that the stories told by participants are reflective of their worldviews, and many participants may change what they say based on their personal motives and attempts to be socially polite. Likewise, participants are a product of the larger culture of which they belong.

It is important that researchers understand who they are and how this is related to their study. Reflexivity is one way that researchers can achieve self-awareness (Patton, 2002). Researchers need to acknowledge that their writing will always be affected by their background and viewpoints (Creswell, 2013). A researcher needs to examine the ways in which their perspectives and theoretical standpoint influences their research (Glesne, 2011).

There are several benefits to being reflexive. First of all, being reflexive can lead to research that is more rich and complete than it would otherwise be. Creating a reflexivity journal is one way that researchers engage actively with their data and thus ensure that their ideas, connections, insights, comparisons, and connections are not lost (Charmaz, 2006). Being reflexive can help ensure the data are more reliable than they would be otherwise. Without self-awareness, researchers are likely to misinterpret or misunderstand their data (Olesen, 2011).

It is important for researchers to keep an open mind during the research process. Glesne (2011) suggested that researchers pay close attention to strong emotions, for strong emotions imply that one's personal views are at work. Glesne claimed that noting our subjective feelings helps us become aware of how our own history is shaping the research. According to Glesne, a researcher needs to reflect upon and learn about their emotions without necessarily trying to control them. Glesne argued that when we track our emotions, we can gain insight into our values, beliefs, needs, and attitudes. Thus, when we track our emotions, we can learn more about ourselves and how we fit into our research.

## **Research Strategies and Methods of Collection and Analysis**

### **Participants and Recruitment Strategies**

Purposeful sampling strategies were used to find informative participants that were able to offer a deeper understanding of the issues associated with the research problem (Patton, as cited in Glesne, 2011). Snowball or chain sampling methods were used to recruit participants by word-of-mouth (Glesne, 2011). To ensure elements of homogeneity, all participants in this study were adolescent girls aged 12-15, and currently enrolled in at least one aesthetic sport.

Participants for this study were recruited through several methods. I contacted several aesthetic sport organizations (i.e. dance studios, figure skating clubs, cheerleading clubs, and gymnastics clubs) to ask if it would be possible to post a recruitment poster in their building/studio (See Appendix A). Likewise, I asked administrators of relevant organizations if I could post information about my study on their Facebook pages and websites.

Seven of the participants in this study were white and one participant was Asian. This is likely due to the homogeneity of the regions the girls came from. Although I aimed to recruit girls from various locations throughout the Greater Toronto Area, the participants that

participated in this study came from the Hamilton, Haldimand Norfolk, and Niagara regions. All of the girls came from upper-middle class families. This is likely due to the high cost of aesthetic sports. Participant profiles have been added to the start of the findings chapter in order to contextualize the data for the reader.

### **Data Collection**

As with most grounded theory studies, semi-structured, in-depth interviews served as the primary method of data collection (Creswell, 2013). Charmaz (2006) argued that interviewing is a useful method of interpretive inquiry because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a topic. Furthermore, Charmaz claimed that there is a combination of flexibility and control in an interview that is beneficial. For example, researchers create the initial questions to guide the study, but they are also able to immediately pursue any new ideas that come up during the discussion. Grounded theory interviews consist of a few broad questions that should be open-ended and non-judgemental (Charmaz, 2006). In a semi-structured interview, there are specific questions, but the researcher also develops new questions when necessary to follow-up on topics that arise during the interview (Glesne, 2011). Following the advice of Charmaz (2006), the interview questions for this study were designed to elicit rich and detailed responses. (See Appendix B for the initial interview questions).

Before each interview, participants were given a letter of invitation (See Appendix C). I also asked the parents to fill out a youth information sheet (see Appendix D) and asked the participants' parents to fill out a permission form for a minor (see Appendix E). According to Glesne (2011), interviews should be conducted in a location that is private, convenient, and comfortable. Following Glesne's advice the interviews were between 28 minutes and 56 minutes in length and conducted in a location based on the preferences of the interviewee (e.g., Brock



University study room; coffee shop). The participants had the option of completing the interview one-to-one in a private space, or to complete the interview in a space where others could potentially hear their answers. With their daughters' permission, three of the mothers stayed close by while the interview was being conducted. During the interviews, I followed an interview protocol consisting of opening and closing remarks, as well as, the interview questions. After each interview was complete, I provided the interviewee with a feedback letter (See Appendix F) thanking them for their time and insights.

The interviews were audio-recorded. Both Creswell (2013) and Charmaz (2006) recommend that researchers use an audio recorder so they can focus all of their attention on the participant. According to Charmaz (2006), using an audio recorder will lead to detailed and accurate transcripts. Furthermore, Charmaz adds that the researcher can take short notes to remind them of follow-up questions and ideas. Creswell (2013) advises researchers to create backup copies of data, develop a master list of information, and create a data collection matrix. An additional benefit of recording, noted by Charmaz (2006) is that having full interview transcripts will allow the researcher to gain deeper insight during the coding process. Charmaz notes that having transcripts is beneficial so researchers can code, re-code, and then go back to original data as often as necessary.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done using grounded theory coding procedures as outlined by Charmaz (2006). According to Charmaz, qualitative coding is the process of defining the meanings of the data. Creswell (2013) offers several core components involved in the coding process. Those characteristics include reducing data into small segments, creating code names for those segments, re-arranging codes to form broader themes, and then making comparisons between

different segments. Throughout the process of coding, I remained cognizant of potential problems that might arise. According to Charmaz (2006), researchers have a tendency to force their preconceptions onto the data. To minimize this, Charmaz recommends that researchers become highly familiar with the data and acknowledge that they are not objective. Furthermore, Charmaz reminds researchers to avoid making assertions unless the data support those claims. As suggested by Glesne (2011), I kept a notebook for coding in which I assigned all the primary codes a page and number. Below each primary code, I wrote my sub-codes and I kept a separate notebook for memos. According to Charmaz (2006), writing short memos helps researchers develop their thoughts and create new connection between data.

Using Charmaz's (2006) principles, I engaged in initial, focused, and theoretical coding. Charmaz posits that initial coding creates an analytic framework in which the researcher can begin to see relationships between structures and implicit processes. Furthermore, initial coding forces the researcher to think in ways that may or may not align with their biases and understanding of the world. During this phase, Charmaz advises researchers to stick closely to the data, remain open, move quickly through the data, and preserve actions during initial coding. During initial coding researchers analyze words, lines, segments of data, incidents, sometimes keywords. As a first step in initial coding, I coded incident-to-incident. This phase is useful for researchers as it helps them gain deeper analytic insight into the data. Following Charmaz' advice, I first coded and compared similar events and then defined significant patterns and processes. All of this was done using a method of constant comparison, in which I compared data with data, interviews with interviews, and reflections with the data.

Focused coding was the second major phase of coding. According to Charmaz (2006), focused coding is the process of using the most frequent or significant earlier codes to help

analyze and sort the data. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) point out that codes should emerge from the data as opposed to being forced upon the data. As recommended by Charmaz (2006), I continued to work back and forth between initial and focused coding. Furthermore, I used both interview transcripts and my memos.

The third stage of coding is theoretical coding. According to Charmaz (2006), theoretical coding is the process of taking broken bits of data and relating them to each other in order to form a theory. During this phase, I analyzed previous codes to identify relations between them. Where the early stages of coding have broken the data into small segments, this phase is the process of putting the pieces back together.

As a part of the data analysis, I aimed to continue coding until categories reached a point of theoretical saturation. According to Kirby & McKenna (1989) theoretical saturation ““occurs when added information does not reveal new understanding about relations or abstraction” (p.138). Thus, theoretical saturation is done to help with theoretical development. To help achieve theoretical saturation, I emailed all of the participants to ask a few follow-up questions regarding areas that were unclear. Seven of the eight participants sent short response emails answering these questions.

In line with my social constructionist assumptions, I used an interpretative form of theorizing when re-constructing theory. According to Charmaz (2006), an interpretive theory is based on the idea that multiple realities exist, and it acknowledges the link between facts and values. Charmaz contends that an interpretive theorist aims to understand the studied phenomenon in abstract terms, articulate theoretical claims, accept subjectivity, and provide an interpretation of the phenomenon being studied.

## **Trustworthiness**

Several strategies were used to ensure that the data from this project are trustworthy. These strategies took place during all phases of the research. The first strategy was to create a reflexivity journal within which, I wrote daily journal entries. Following Glesne's (2011) advice, I started writing in this journal as soon as I began recruiting participants. During the research process, I also used two additional strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the data, in that, I audio recorded and then transcribed all interviews. Having a detailed transcription of the interview allowed me to have accurate and detailed notes and enhanced the reliability of the data (Creswell, 2009).

Several of the strategies I used to ensure the trustworthiness of my data occurred during the writing phase of my research. As suggested by Creswell (2009), I used rich and thick description. The second strategy, using rich and thick description, included conveying all findings, even negative and opposing themes. This strategy also involved including verbatim quotes, giving detailed descriptions, and providing several perspectives on each topic. As a final strategy, I have included a section documenting the limitations of my study. An important part of demonstrating the trustworthiness of a study is to inform the reader of the limitations of said study (Glesne, 2011).

## **Ethical Considerations**

It is the researcher's responsibility to conduct research that is ethical. Several strategies were employed to ensure that research was done ethically. Before each interview, the girls received a letter of invitation and were asked to fill out a consent form. Informed consent is necessary before doing research. However, as Glesne (2011) notes, informed consent can empower research participants, but it does not mitigate all power relations, nor does it preclude

potential abuse of research findings (Glesne, 2011). Thus, additional steps are necessary. Ethical considerations should be taken before, during, and after the research process.

The interview process offers opportunities to conduct research which is ethical and perhaps even beneficial to participants. And yet, Glesne (2011) suggests that although interviews are helpful to document the voices of many, the interview is not entirely unproblematic. For example, the researcher is in a powerful position and determines the interaction via development of interview questions. However, as Glesne points out, the interview has the potential to be beneficial for participants too. For example, by actively listening to my participants, I was able to create a supportive and engaging environment in which the participants had a chance to tell their story. To conduct ethical interviews, I acknowledged the power relations inherent in the interview process and aimed to balance the power by acknowledging that my participants are experts in their own lives. All of the interviews took place in a private, quiet, and comfortable space.

Ethical considerations also arise during the writing process. I protected the anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms and worked to conceal their identity within the written report (Creswell, 2013). A written report has the potential to impact readers as well as the participants and sites being studied (Creswell, 2013). Using grounded theory data analysis, my work is grounded in the data. Nevertheless, as a researcher, I have a responsibility to convey my positionality to the reader (Glesne, 2011) and I have aimed to make clear that the data and analysis are a mere interpretation of the phenomenon being studied.

## **Chapter Five: Findings**

Before presenting the findings, I will provide an overview of the eight girls who participated in the study. A description of the girls' age, grade, and sports participation are discussed, and a few points of interest have been added. While interpreting the findings, this may help the reader better understand the context of the girls' lived experiences and reflections.

### **Profiles**

Emily (age 13, grade 8) is involved in recreational dance and cheer. Emily has been taking dance for three years and is currently taking jazz and lyrical. She started cheer last year at a local club. Emily has previously participated in soccer and has also attended a basketball camp. She wants to continue with dance and cheer for some time.

Madison (age 15, grade 10) has been dancing for six years. She is currently a competitive dancer, taking pointe (ballet), jazz, tap, and hip-hop. When she first started dance, Madison only enrolled in ballet because it was mandatory for her dance studio. She initially found ballet boring. However, after moving on to the more advanced form of ballet, pointe, Madison began to love ballet. It is now one of her favorite classes. She also participates in soccer and guitar club at her school.

Emma (age 13, grade 8) is a competitive dancer, a gymnast, and a soccer player. Emma started dance at age 6. She dances four days a week and does four classes per day. She is currently enrolled in tap, jazz, ballet, lyrical, contemporary, and acro. Emma's favorite activities are gymnastics and acro because she loves the creative routines.

Abigail (age 15, grade 10) is a competitive dancer as well as a competitive figure skater. Abigail started figure skating at age 5 and started dance a year later at age 6. While she initially planned to drop dance in order to pursue her love of figure skating, Abigail had a change of heart

after being invited to be a competitive dancer. Abigail now takes jazz, tap, hip-hop, contemporary, and lyrical. She says dance is her passion and she hopes to be a professional dancer one day.

Olivia (age 14, grade 9) is a dancer, horseback rider, and ringette player. Olivia started dance as early as she can remember. She is enrolled in acro and hip-hop, and has recently dropped out of tap. Although Olivia loves dancing, her true passion is horseback riding. She owns her own horse and attends many horseback riding competitions.

Sarah (age 12, grade 7) is a dancer, gymnast, and ringette goalie. Sarah started dance at age 5 and gymnastics at age 11. She takes acro, jazz, and ballet. She previously participated in soccer, but later dropped out. In her spare time, she takes on entrepreneurial pursuits. She is currently creating a silly putty which she is selling to her friends at school.

Ashley (age 12, grade 7) is a competitive dancer. Ashley started dance at age 5. She takes lyrical, contemporary, jazz, acro, and ballet. Ashley dances five days a week, for six hours a day. She loves the supportive environment at her dance studio and is grateful that she dances with older girls as she feels they can teach her a lot. Ashley previously participated on a swim team, however she had to drop out due to her demanding schedule. She hopes to continue dance until grade 12, and plans to stop once she gets to university.

Jenna (age 14, grade 9) started dance when she was only 2 1/2 years old. She is a competitive dancer, enrolled in ballet, jazz, lyrical, tap, acro, and contemporary. She is also involved in her school's cross country and gymnastics teams. She has previously participated in soccer, hip-hop, and pointe. Jenna loves dance and she cannot imagine leaving, mostly because she loves spending time with her dance friends.

## Introduction

Through my analysis I have developed three major themes that best reflect my interpretation of the experiences of the participants. The first major theme, “Masculinities and Revealing a Higher Social Status in the School Environment” illustrates the girls’ perceptions that masculinity is privileged at school. Emerging from this theme were two sub-themes: i) Privileging Masculine Identities at School and Enhancing Girls’ Social Status, and ii) Denigrating Boys’ Participation in Aesthetic sports and the Intersection with Sexual Stigma. Together these two sub-themes suggest that feminine qualities are stigmatised. While girls can gain status by adopting more masculine qualities, boys who adopt feminine qualities are marginalised.

The second theme, “Framing Success through Gendered and Neoliberal Discourses” highlights the neoliberal and post-feminist discourses of empowerment whereby although gender equality is presumed to have been achieved, sexism is still prevalent. In line with these neoliberal discourses, girls consider success as a personal responsibility. In turn, the girls are focused on using self discipline as a means of self improvement. The two sub-themes that emerged in this theme are: i) Playing with the Boys and the Marginalization of Girls’ Achievements, and ii) Viewing Aesthetic Sports as Offering Self Improvement through Self Discipline.

“Constructing an Ideal Image” emerged as the third major theme. This theme highlights the complexities girls face in constructing an ideal image. The girls’ discussion reveals the judgement and surveillance present in their lives. In turn, the girls often use brands as a way to construct an image that is sporty and yet traditionally feminine. There are three sub-themes within this theme: i) Critiquing the Girlie Girl as Excessive or Lacking, ii) Conforming to the Regulatory Gaze, and iii) Constructing the Ideal Appearance through Consumption.



Throughout the three major themes, it became apparent that girly girls and sporty girls are often seen to have differing strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the complex experience of success for both sporty girls and girly girls advanced the core theme of “Falling Short of the Neoliberal Ideal” and is presented at the end of this chapter.

### **Theme #1: Masculinities and Revealing a Higher Social Status in the School Environment**

The first major theme, “Masculinities and Revealing a Higher Social Status in the School Environment,” and the two sub- themes that emerged, revealed that masculinities are privileged in a school setting. It was shown that girls can enhance their status among school peers by adopting masculine traits and through gaining approval and friendship of sporty and high-status boys. In turn, boys could lose status by participating in activities associated with femininity, and in turn, could experience sexual stigma from their peers. The two sub-themes, (i) Privileging Masculine Identities at School and Enhancing Girls’ Social Status, and (ii) Denigrating Boys’ Participation in Aesthetic sports and the Intersection with Sexual Stigma are discussed in this section.

#### **Privileging Masculine Identities at School and Enhancing Girls’ Social Status**

Most of the participants perceived that masculine sports were a high-status activity among school peers relative to aesthetic sports and other arts-based activities. When discussing what makes an aesthetic sport unpopular, Emma (age 13) stated: “Ballet would be, more like pushed away to more girly girls. Because less guys do it and it’s not on TV. Usually guy sports are more popular.” It also was clear that girls could gain status by joining a masculine sport. For example, Abigail (age 15) stated:

*It's about having that title behind them. People will be like, “oh wow, you're a basketball player.” And meanwhile, if you join, like, the art*

*club, people will be like "no". That's, "we don't even know who that person is".*

Other comments emphasized the importance of masculine sports as being more desirable for a higher social status; in particular, when a team was seen to be successful. As Madison (age 15) stated:

*I know, like I go to [school name]. Rugby is a really big thing there for females and males. I know like, if you're on the rugby team you're kind of like, the rugby team is kind of on the higher end of the sports. And if you're on the basketball or the swimming team, none of them are really bad, but, like I don't know. I guess rugby is just our biggest and most successful team, so it's seen as the best. And therefore, the players are seen as the best.*

It was clear, too, that girls who participated in masculine sports also enjoyed a higher social status and perceptions of being strong. Although there were some minor variations, sporty girls were seen to be competitive, confident, strong, and popular. Jenna (age 14) defined a sporty girl in the following quote:

*Definitely competitive. Usually they wear more baggy clothes, I guess. Because they're always ready to do something or jump into a sport that they see going on in the school. They're nice people overall. They're really great in gym... They are very sporty.*

Sporty girls were often defined as popular and having many friends. There were several reasons for the popularity of sporty girls. For example, sporty girls were seen to be more outgoing, and thus more likely to make friends. They were also seen to be more confident and unconcerned with academics. When asked to describe a popular girl, Olivia (aged 14) said:

*They, like they're always with their group of friends. They are never alone. They, like they're always, in a class, they are always talking. They don't focus that much when they are in their class. ... Or they'll be on most of the sports teams.*

Underlying much of the girls' talk was also the sense that the sporty girls were seen to have more masculine personality traits compared to girls in traditionally aesthetic sports. Significant to this idea, was the notion that masculine qualities were also generally considered to be positive and highly desirable. Sporty girls were often labeled as easygoing, confident, and popular. There was a notion that sporty girls were less superficial than the 'typical' girl. At the same time, sporty girls were seen as being like boys, but not quite up to the same standards as the higher status boys. Emma (age 13) demonstrates this belief:

*They may act more like a guy, you could say. Because girls are kind of like all like all that drama and whatever. But like, the masculine kind of girl stay away from all that. And they push themselves away and they try to stay with the guys.*

It was also apparent that seeking the boys' approval through friendship and social circles was highly desirable to elevate a girls' social status. When asked what makes sporty girls

popular, most participants claimed that the popularity stemmed from being friends with high status, sporty boys. As Abigail's (age 15) quote suggests, boys showed more attention to girls in masculine sports.

*Because... In my school, guys talk to girls who they have the same interests of. Where it's like, if there was a girl doing figure skating and someone doing hockey, they still do the same sport like it's still kind of skating. But the guys would think the other ones had more in common.*

Another reason that the participants believed that boys liked girls in more masculine sports was because boys were seen to be impressed by girls who they considered tough. For example, Jenna (age 14) claimed that girls in masculine sports, such as basketball, were more popular than girls in aesthetic sports. When asked to explain why this may be, Jenna stated “*I don't know, like, the guys are more into it. And they are very impressed that they have girls who can actually go against them. And play against them.*” As Abigail (age 15) suggests, some boys will find sporty girls more attractive and dateable:

*Even guys want a tougher girl.*

*Interviewer: What do they like about a tough girl?*

*Because she can fend for herself, I guess. They don't always have to watch over her and protect her.*

Indeed, some girls even went as far as concealing their participation in what was perceived as aesthetic sports within the school culture; some of the girls took steps to hide some

aspects of their sporting lives while at school. None of the girls in this study identified as being girly girls; however, many of them felt that they were slightly more feminine than a 'typical' girl. Although they seemed to show pride in their aesthetic sports, there was also an underlying tension to manage their image to not appear overly girly. For example, Madison (age 15) stated: *"Like my other friend who was also at the same dance studio, she wouldn't mention ballet as much. She would be like, 'oh yeah I was in tap'. Or 'I was in hip-hop'."* Madison's quote reveals that sometimes girls may conceal their participation in aesthetic sports within the high school culture. Later in the interview, Madison (age 15) explained how although she does not hide her involvement in aesthetic sports, she does use strategies to downplay certain aspects of her sport participation.

*No, because usually like when I meet someone I just say that I'm in dance. And if they're interested, they'll be like what kind of dance? And I'll be like, I meant everything. And then they will ask what. And I'll mention them, I don't know, like I usually start with my favorites. So, I'll go hip-hop, and then I'll go ballet. So usually say the two together. Just like, I don't know, then they'll be like "oh she's a tomboy and "she's a girly girl. Maybe there isn't really a type".*

### **Denigrating Boys Participation in Aesthetic Sports and Sexual Stigma**

Although girls' participation in masculine sports was accepted and seen to enhance their social status, boys would clearly be subject to ridicule if they participated in traditionally feminine, aesthetic sports. All the participants noted that the boys would find it difficult to

participate in aesthetic sports for fear of being made fun of. As noted by Schippers (2007), in order for the gender hierarchy to remain intact, men who embody hegemonic femininity need to be labeled as feminine and inferior. To illustrate this point, the girls all stated that very few boys were enrolled in aesthetic sports at their studios. Although the girls claimed they would not make fun of a boy in a feminine sport, they felt boys would be judged by others at school. As Sarah (age 12) explained, their high school peer culture would ridicule boys for participating in traditionally feminine and aesthetic sports: “They would make fun of him...Like ‘why are you doing a girls’ sport? That's for girls’ and all of that.”

Moreover, the girls felt that the limited number of boys in aesthetic sports added to the stigma. This is best exemplified by Abigail (age 15) who stated: *“I think guys are kind of ashamed to be like ‘oh, we are dancers’. It's just the way society is nowadays. People will be like ‘oh, you can't dance’. Like if more boys danced then it would be a lot better.”*

It also became clear that there was a strong association between males’ participation in aesthetic sports, and consequently, the perceived stigma related to their sexual identity and being labeled as ‘gay’. All the girls stated that boys in aesthetic sports were likely to be labelled as LGBTQ. Although the girls stated that they were accepting of LGBTQ people, they felt that a boy could be teased by his peers if he was perceived as gay. Commenting on the stereotypes that existed, the girls gave uncomfortable responses, such as:

*Well the boys that are my dance studio and at my cheer studio, they're most likely to be gay. But, like because, I don't know...But the boys at my studio, they are...But boys that do like football and stuff, they are as well, so... I kind of... I don't know. Like if you're not, then you can join*

*whatever sport you want. But most likely, they're, like what I've seen it, they are. (Emily, age 13)*

*I think that they would be like, I think that they would say "oh, he likes men" or something. Or that he just, I think that's a big one really. I mean, if guys do hip-hop then it's okay. But if you see a guy doing ballet, they think it's kind of weird. They think it's not normal. Which is kind of sad. (Abigail, age 15)*

However, as the following response shows, many of the girls felt this treatment was unjust and wanted to see positive changes. Although the girls were all accepting of LGBTQ people, it was clear that homophobia was present within their school environments. Boys perceived as being gay were likely to be stigmatized, and in turn, have a lower social status among school peers. As a result, the girls noted that the few boys who are in feminine, aesthetic sports are more likely to keep this aspect of their lives concealed. This sentiment is clear in Ashley's (age 12) quote:

*Maybe like guys that dance, how they are treated. Mostly when people think of guy dancers they think of guys who are gay. I know a lot of guys who are not gay and they're great dancers. Like, all of these competitions I have been to, there are some really good guys there. And it doesn't matter if they're gay or not. They can just dance. It is just dance, like have fun. But people, a lot of guys don't really tell people at school that they dance. That they do ballet. They might tell people that*

*they do hip-hop and things like that, but they wouldn't tell them that they do a ballet, lyrical, or contemporary.*

Thus, the first theme revealed that masculine traits are deemed superior to feminine traits. This can be seen in the higher status of masculine sports as well as higher status granted to girls who adopt more masculine traits. Sporty girls were seen to be more popular and specifically more likely to be friends with boys. Feminine traits, on the other hand, were stigmatized. This led to girls, at times, concealing their participation in these sports. Boys were even more likely to conceal their participation in aesthetic sports due to the increased stigma and homophobia surrounding boys' participation.

## **Theme #2: Framing Success through Gendered and Neoliberal Discourses**

The second theme, "Framing Success through Gendered and Neoliberal Discourses", highlights the neoliberal and post-feminist discourses of empowerment whereby although gender equality is presumed to have been achieved, sexism is still prevalent. This can be seen in through gendering (and derogatory) language related to girls' physical skills and accomplishments. In line with neoliberal discourses of self improvement, the girls viewed aesthetic sports as providing them with the discipline needed for a successful future. The two sub-themes: (i) Playing with the Boys, and (ii) Self-improvement through Self-Discipline are discussed in this section.

### **Playing with the Boys and the Marginalization of Girls' Achievements**

In addition to having a higher social status within the peer culture and at school, masculine sports were also perceived as being more physically demanding than more aesthetic sports. The participants consistently noted that most of their peers assumed masculine sports require more physical strength. For example, when asked which sports would give a girl status,



Sarah (age 12) stated: *“Umm, more like a guy sport. Because it's a little bit more challenging. Because guys are more muscular and stronger. And you have to try to keep up.”* Sarah’s statement illustrates that masculine sports were viewed as more challenging. Consequently, girls who mastered masculine sports could be seen as exceptions to feminine fragility. This was illustrated in Abigail’s (age 15) quote: *“I think that if a girl was doing a masculine sport, like hockey, they would just assume that girl is tough.”*

There was a shared assumption among participants that males were physically stronger and likely to be better at sports than females. However, many of the girls beamed with pride as they talked about girls in their school who outperformed boys in sport. There was a certain sense of solidarity among girls whereby they saw girls’ success in sport as a group effort. Ashley’s (age 12) quote illustrates that the girls took great delight when they outperformed boys in sport. It also highlights the sense of girls versus boys competition:

*We will be in gym class and I, like I build up my endurance in dance class because I have to survive through this technique class. And I can run around the gym for the 12 minutes that we need to do it. And they're all walking and out of breath. And then they are saying that dance is the easiest thing in the world. And that the workouts are easy because we are girls. And they think that we don't have as much work as they do. And I'm the one who can do the army push-ups. And they're the ones doing the girl push-ups, with their knees on the ground and their butt stuck up in the air. And they think that they are so strong and macho. And then they try to arm wrestle us and we can beat them. I don't know, they're just boys. (Ashley, age 12)*

Surprisingly, the girls in this study did not seem interested in competing with other girls. There was a sense of girls working together to break into a boy's domain. Unfortunately, many of the girls noted that boys are under intense pressure to succeed athletically. They noted that boys are often teased when outperformed by a girl. The participants suggested that girls were not held to the same athletic standards as boys. While girls were not expected to be athletic, boys who fail to live up to athletic ideals are often teased as being (weak) like girls.

*People usually don't say that to a girl. Because some of the girls at my school they can throw better than the boys. Normally the girls and guys say that to the other guys. Because apparently throwing like a girl is something bad. (Ashley, age 12)*

As the above quote alluded to, it was clear that gendering language in sport (i.e. throw like a girl; girl push-ups) (re)constructs females as inferior to males. Performing “like a girl” could be used as an insult towards boys who performed poor athletically. This suggests that being a female is a form of being lesser or inferior. There was also a sense of pride in Ashley's voice when she stated that many girls could throw better than most boys. This illustrates that Ashley felt it was somewhat of an honor to be better than a boy.

In addition to wanting girls to be recognized as competent athletes, many of the girls wanted people to acknowledge the difficulty of aesthetic sports. Participants noted that boys and girls often devalued aesthetic sports and labeled them as easier than masculine sports. As Sarah (age 12) states: *“They dont think it is a sport. I know a lot of people who don't think it is a sport. A lot of boys who I know do not think it is a sport.”* All of the participants felt the aesthetic sports deserve more recognition. The girls felt they worked hard to perfect their performance in sport

and they wanted others to acknowledge the strength, skill, and hard work they were capable of. This is best summarized by one participant who stated:

*They do just as much work as hockey and other athletes do. I know a lot of boys in my school and they're like "oh dance is not a sport". And they talk about their hockey workouts and they do like 10 push-ups and like 10 sit ups and then they are done. And then they just go on the ice and shoot pucks. And then I think about mine. We have a two hour stretch and technique class and it's hard. Like, it is hard. And these boys think it is like the easiest thing in the world to just twirl around with your hands on your head like that. It's not easy. Like, dance is hard. It is really hard. All of the technique that goes into it. You need to think about everything. Like oh my goodness, you need to hold every part of your body. You need to be aware of what your fingers are doing, what the tips of your toes are doing, it is hard. I don't know why people don't think it is a sport. There's a lot of training that goes into things like this. (Ashley, age 12).*

### **Viewing Aesthetic Sports as Offering Self Improvement through Self Discipline**

In line with post-feminist and neoliberal discourses which promote self-discipline and self-monitoring (Gill, 2007), the girls in this study spoke of constantly improving their lives and focusing on the future. Most of the girls stated that they enjoyed the aesthetic sport environment. But it was clear that a large part of their enjoyment stemmed from the sense of mastery and accomplishment that their sport gave them. The girls loved working towards something difficult

because they felt pride when they were able to finally see results. Interestingly, the girls also enjoyed the competitive aspects of the sport. The following quotes are representative of the shared common insights among the girls:

*Okay, well like its very, I wouldn't say very simple, because its very hard really. But when you work so long at something and you finally get to do it in front of a whole bunch of people you just, you feel awesome about it. And it goes for any (dance) style. (Madison, age 15).*

*Mostly because I get to be with my friends and dance for me is just really fun and its kind of exciting. And for cheer, I love the competitions and I, like I condition a lot in cheer, so I feel good about myself then. (Emily, age 13).*

It became evident that the girls viewed feminine, aesthetic sports as an investment in their future. They had a sense of pride surrounding the perception that girls in aesthetic sports are often more studious than sporty girls and girls who are not in any sports. Several of the participants noted that sport was beneficial because it prepared them for their future at university. Although the girls were only age 12-15, they all seemed confident that they would be going to university one day. In this sense, sport was another activity that the girls could add to their resumes. But even more than this, sport was seen as instilling the neoliberal values of hard work and dedication to achieve individual success. As Madison's (age 15) quote explained, girls in aesthetic sport were seen to have a competitive advantage over their peers:

*Because I feel like they critique you and tell you that you need to practice at home. It's kind of like homework for dance. You learn to balance everything. I feel like dance is also a really good thing. I wouldn't say just dance, but having a busy schedule and doing something all the time is really good for students. Especially when students want to go to university or college. Because if you stop dance or the sports, you feel like you have more time because you're not doing it. And you're more known to managing your time. I feel like that's a really big benefit. Because people who play video games or hang out with friends all the time I feel like when they get to postsecondary they will have no idea about balancing life. But when I go I will have more of an idea.*

It became evident too, that the girls invested a great deal of time and energy into their sport. In a candidly honest moment, Ashley (age 12) stated: “*Well, I'm 12 years old and I dance every, I dance five days a week. For like six hours a day. It's really tiring.*” Ashley’s quote revealed the difficulties involved in her sport life. Many of the girls had mixed emotions surrounding their aesthetic sport participation. As evidenced in the following quotes, the girls sporting lives were highly routine and centered around hard work.

*A typical dance class. Well, normally I get home around 3:30 and then I go and get ready for dance. Dance normally starts around 5:00. And then I'm there until 8:30. And we have like, you just go to your class. Classes are 45 minutes to an hour long. You go in to class and you do your routine, and then, that's about it. You either go on break, eat*

*something, or whatever. And then you go back into your classes. And then you just go home. (Abigail, age 15)*

*Well, in a normal, like stretch and technique class that trains you physically and things like that, we do a lot of cardio and a lot of working out that way. And it's mostly hard work. And not a lot of just relaxing things. We may stretch like half an hour of the class. But it's a two-hour class of just working your body. And for our normal class it's like choreography. Sometimes we may get yelled at if we do something wrong. But we always get around. Some of the choreography may be hard or difficult. But we have to go through the class and do it on stage anyways so... (Ashley, age 12)*

Participants made it clear that they view aesthetic sport as something that provides them with transferable skills. Participants credited the skills they learned in their sport to helping them succeed in an academic context. The girls also viewed aesthetic sports as something that helped them gain interpersonal skills which could translate into social success. This suggests that the girls are aiming to live up to neoliberal ideals of being 'well-rounded' (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). When asked to describe any benefits of aesthetic sports, Jenna (age 14) stated:

*Getting along with people. Because you have to work together to be able to do the dance and performance. At school you can use those skills to make more friends...I get better at talking to people and like performing. So when you're doing a presentation at school you're able to do it because you're able to dance in front of hundreds of people.*

A key area in which self discipline was also evident was in the girls' physical appearance. Specifically, the body was seen as evidence of how healthy one was. Several of the girls felt that a girl could be a target of peer ridicule for having a body size that was perceived as being too skinny or too large. More importantly, a few of the girls even seemed to agree with the idea that girls who do not fit the physical ideal were at fault. For example, girls could exert too much self discipline and being 'super skinny' was not necessarily seen as the physical ideal. For example, as Ashley (age 12) explained:

*I just know that I exercise a lot. And I can't eat sensibly. I don't pig out. But I can eat bread and pizza and carbs and things like that. Then I can go to dance the next day and work it all off. But some people, they don't eat at all. And then they are super skinny. The dancers that I see, they exercise and work a lot. So they're already burning off all of that. And then they're not eating so they're getting even more skinny. And it's just too much. That's like, that's not what stereotypical dancers are supposed to look like. That is just too skinny.*

Other comments emphasized that the participants did not necessarily judge other girls for being unfit, however they did judge others for having low self-confidence. Some of the girls perceived that body insecurities were the result of an individual's low self-confidence, and thus, it was up to the individual to become confident. This sentiment was best reflected by Emily (age 13) who commented:

*I just, I like to be healthy and stuff because it makes me feel better. But there are quite a few people in my whole school, and especially in grade*

*8, are bigger because they feel insecure about themselves. And when you are bigger I think that you get more insecure about yourself. So it kind of like continues.*

In sum, the second theme highlighted the post-feminist and neoliberal discourses of presumed gender equality. The girls all seemed to embody the post-feminist supergirl identity of having both feminine and masculine traits. The girls also all had a neoliberal, post-feminist drive for success. Although girls have managed to succeed in a masculine domain of sport, gendered language reveals that gender norms have not been broken. This theme captures the girls' focus on their futures and determination to build transferable skills, which can be used in their future university careers.

### **Theme #3: Constructing the Ideal Image**

The third major theme, "Constructing the Ideal Image," focuses on the negative connotation associated with femininity and, in particular, the denigration of girls who are labelled as girlie girls. This theme highlights the intense judgment girls face, as well as the sexist aspect of this judgment. In addition to avoiding anything deemed excessive, the girls used certain brands to construct an ideal appearance. The three sub-themes: (i) Critiquing the Girlie Girl, (ii) Conforming to the Regulatory Gaze, and (iii) Buying into the Sporty Girl Ideal through Consumptive Practices are discussed in detail below.

#### **Critiquing the Girlie Girl as Excessive or Lacking**

As stated in the previous section, the girls in this study perceived that masculine traits were privileged in the sport context. While masculine traits were considered to be mostly positive qualities, throughout the interviews it became clear that feminine traits and being labelled a "girlie girl" represented femininity and negative connotations; in that the girlie girl



was seen as someone who dressed in outdated, hyper-feminine ways. Specifically, girly girls were girls who loved pink. As Jenna (age 14) stated: “*She wears a lot of pink. She’s very hyper and very outgoing. Wears a lot of like, I don’t know, like colorful colors*”. Other comments by the girls included:

*A lot of people, not me specifically, but a lot of people think that they are girls who like pink. Everything is pink, that’s a girly girl. And you only like to wear dresses and skirts, instead of wearing pants and shorts. Or something like that. Or a certain shoe color, like if you wear a girly kind of pink or purple shoe color. They may think things like that. Or just the way you talk. If you have a certain kind of accent, like a bit of a high-pitched voice, people might think, like, she talks like a girly girl.*

*(Ashley, age 12)*

Unlike the positive descriptions given to sporty girls, girly girls were defined using mostly negative qualities. Moreover, the complexities of the perceived negative traits of girly girls was also evident. For example, girly girls could be seen as immature and insecure, while also being considered to be stuck up and mean. For example:

*I think it has changed because if you’re like girly and pretty in pink and kind of like a mean girl, I guess that’s kind of a label, like if you’re all pretty in pink than you’re looked at like a stereo-typical mean girl and all like stuck-up. But I don’t know, I guess that’s kind of how it is now. A lot of girls nowadays are like relaxed and more carefree than the whole “pretty in pink”. (Madison, age 15)*

A key feature of the girlie girl was that she was seen to either be non-athletic or to only enjoy the more feminine, aesthetic sports. In some ways, this hints at the perceived easiness and superficiality of aesthetic sports. Even the supposedly weak and non-athletic girlie girl would be able to enjoy them.

*Yeah. A lot of girls think that girlie girls are constantly doing their hair. And that they think that boys have cooties. And they don't really like doing sports or they do, like only ones for girls. Like they are preppy, I don't know. (High pitched voice) (Ashley, age 12)*

Similar to previous research, which suggests that girlie girls are stigmatized (Francis, Archer, Moote, de Witt, & Yeomans, 2016; Holland & Harpin, 2013), many of the interviewees felt that girlie girls were generally less popular than sporty girls. As Madison (age 15) stated: “*Yeah I don't see too many girlie girls in, like the popular groups in school. I see like some, but not to the extreme...*”

It was clear, too, that girlie girls could experience stigma and may be socially ridiculed by their peers within the school culture. Although the participants spoke of these issues rather nonchalantly, Emma’s (age 13) explained that the effect of this bullying could have very real consequences:

*Well, one of my friends she came to our school for one year. She acted like a girlie girl and I guess she kind of got made fun of for it. And there's other times like if you were to wear nice dress you would be made fun of people would make fun of you for dressing up. Like, that's not normal....I think it's just the normal for her. But she did come from a*

*Catholic school that's not that far away. She came to our school for a year and then she left again. So I think it's probably because she didn't really like how she was being made fun of. She probably wanted to change that.*

In sum, the girlie girl was seen to be lacking all of the positive masculine qualities that boys have. Unlike the sporty girl who has adopted many masculine traits, the girlie girl was completely lacking in the strength associated with masculinity. The girlie girl is thus representative of all the excessive and inadequate aspects of femininity. Unsurprisingly, the girls in this study distanced themselves from the girlie girl. While the participants felt sorry for the girlie girl, they also seemed to lack a deep sense of compassion for girls who were bullied for being girls.

### **Conforming to the Regulatory Gaze**

Throughout the interviews the girls spoke of constant judgment and bullying at their schools. Similar to Shannon's (2016) findings on competitive dance, while their participation in aesthetic sports was seen as a space that provided friendships and camaraderie, school was seen as a place where one had to engage in impression management at all times. Appearance, in particular, was subject to intense scrutiny. This sentiment was best reflected by Abigail (age 15) who commented:

*I think bullying. Like, there's a lot of bullying now. And I guess what girls wear, and what guys have to wear for their attire. People are just like "oh you can't wear that". ... It's just, I don't even know what it is today, it's just people. They just judge.*

Although being perceived as girly was viewed as undesirable, girls still wanted to look stereotypically attractive. Although the ideal appearance might differ slightly from school to school, it was clear that an attractive girl was natural, effortless, and blended in with everyone. The girls felt a clear need to engage in impression management. As Jenna (age 14) stated: *“It depends on how you wear stuff. Or how you do your make up. They will always judge you so you always have to look your best so you don't get made fun of.”* The girls in this study spoke of balancing between wanting to look attractive without looking like they were trying too hard. Jenna (age 14) later added *“People, like sporty girls that wear a normal amount of makeup, but not a lot that people can tell. They just blend in with everyone.”* Jenna’s quote suggests that a main goal was to appear similar to others and thus be less at risk for being judged.

Participants were all highly aware of the norm at their school. Although the norms differed slightly between schools, it was clear that behaviors and fashions at school were much more subdued than those found in the media. Anything deemed excessive was policed. The amount of makeup one wore was a key factor in distinguishing girly girls from sporty girls. While wearing no makeup was generally seen as acceptable, wearing too much makeup was heavily judged.

*Usually girls just put concealer on. And foundation. They put mascara on and that's basically it. (Jenna, age 14).*

*Like I've never really been into makeup. But you sometimes wear more, but usually I just wear a little foundation and mascara. I don't do eyeliner, but I'll do eyeshadow. I feel like lipstick is more, like, I think eyebrows and lipstick are more stereotyped towards girlyies then like,*

*'okay you're just wearing eyeshadow and mascara that's like normal'.*

*(Madison, age 15)*

Underlying much of the girls' talk was the sense that girls judged other girls more often than boys judged girls. It was commonly noted that girls frequently gossiped and started rumors about other girls. When asked who was likely to have a harder time at school, Emma (age 13) stated: *"I would say, girls. Because more girls will talk about other girls, like behind their back. And they would say stuff even if it's not true. They would make up rumors about them and try to start gossip."* The participants felt girls had more pressure in all areas, ranging from academics to physical appearances. Jenna (age 14) exemplified this when she stated:

*Because high school is supposed to be harder. Girls are supposed to keep up with all their grades and how they look because they're going to get more judged than the guys. Because the older girls, they are more judgey than the older guys are. Because the guys don't really care.*

Although most of the girls liked the makeup and costumes required in their sport, they made it clear that they would be unwilling to appear this way at school. As can be seen in the following quote, wearing an "excessive" amount of makeup to school would result in judgment and ridicule by their peers.

*No. No, no, no, no. I don't wear makeup to school. Never mind, like diva lashes and red lipstick. Like, no. People don't, people at my school they wear just cover up and mascara. If you even wear mascara and cover up in my grade, like some of the girls will go up to you and they'll be like*

*"are you wearing mascara?" "Are you wearing like too much cover up?". If you came wearing like tons of cover up, like big red lipstick, it wouldn't just be the kids that are looking at you. Like the teachers will be looking at you too. Like, that's not something you would normally wear to school. (Ashley, age 12).*

### **Constructing the Ideal Appearance through Consumption**

A recurrent theme throughout the interviews was that the clothing one wore was symbolic of one's identity. That is, a main factor in determining which group one belonged to was what brands they wore and consumed. For example, Ashley (age 12) claimed the ideal girls are: *"People who like Starbucks or girls who wear their hair down. Or girls who wear Dutch braids a lot. With the fake nails. With iPhone 6s. Making music videos and going on Snap chat and Instagram"*. It is clear from Ashley's quote that the ideal girl is not so much a type of person as she is a type of consumer and the ideal girl is judged on the things she consumes. This is reflective of the post-feminist focus on consuming one's way into being. It is problematic because it marginalizes girls who are unable to afford such products.

Certain brands were classified as girlie whereas others were considered to be more masculine. It was clear that a large factor distinguishing girlie girls from sporty girls was the brands one wore. In fact, brands were so important that they could be used in place of behavior and appearance. Participants explained that someone who wore a specific brand was enough to make their sporty girl or girlie girl identity clear. The following quote illustrates the significance of brands to (re)constructing a girl's identity:

*I feel like appearance would have a first impression too. So like, if I walked up to them in what I'm wearing now and like Adidas pants and like a sweater and I said "oh I do ballet", then they would be like shocked. But it's like, if I was wearing a skirt and I was wearing like a more nicer shirt then they wouldn't be as surprised because I would be seen like a girlie girl because I would be wearing a skirt. (Madison, age 15).*

The brands considered cool were often more masculine, however as stated earlier, girls also wanted to (re)produce the 'right' feminine qualities through their make-up and appearance. As a result, girls often had a stereotypically attractive appearance with regards to their makeup and presentation while wearing clothing that was considered sporty and masculine. Describing the trend at her school, Ashley (age 12) stated:

*Oh, those Kobe pants. They're like those big puffy pants with the black Nikes. Like, just everyone wears them. Just black shoes with the white Nike things on them. Like everyone wears those. And they always have the fake nails, everyone has acrylic nails nowadays. They all, they always have their hair down straightened...I know a lot of girls who are, like they play more boys' sports things, but they are girlie girls. Like, girls who are on Snapchat all the time. Or they're like "oh I have this many followers on Instagram, I'm so cool!". Like they're always taking selfies and they're watching music videos all the time. Meanwhile they*

*play hockey, and they always wear their hockey jerseys and things like that.*

As the interviews progressed, it also became clear that dressing in traditionally feminine ways was stigmatized. Interestingly, dressing up was also stigmatized because it could be viewed as “trying too hard”. In essence, dressing up could be viewed as trying to be better than others.

*Well, I remember when we were younger we would all wear dresses. But now if we were to wear a dress we would be made fun of. So no one really wears a dress anymore. As you get older you get comments like "oh you're dressing up" or whatever. But you're not really trying to. (Emma, age 13).*

*Because I like to dress up more fancy and cute and stuff. And people are like, at my school people don't really do that. Except for the younger kids because they don't really care. And well people talk behind your back and stuff. But that happens to everyone, so...(Emily, age 13).*

Thus, the third theme highlighted the complexities girls faced in constructing an ideal image. The negative connotations associated with girly girls led to many girls aiming to create an image that was stereotypically feminine, yet without being overly feminine and had somewhat of a masculine overtone. At the same time, girls had to navigate their specific school culture and could be judged heavily for failing to achieve an ideal appearance. In turn, the girls often used brands to help construct their identity.



### **Core Theme: Falling Short of the Neoliberal Ideal**

From the three major themes, “Masculinities and Revealing a Higher Social Status in the School Environment”, “Framing Success through Gendered and Neoliberal Discourses”, and “Constructing an Ideal Image” a core theme emerged reflecting the idea of “Falling Short of the Neoliberal Ideal”. This core theme represents the culmination of the girls’ experiences, and helps to capture and integrate the insights gained from the analysis as a whole. Throughout the interviews it became clear that sporty girls were seen to be socially popular and confident, whereas girly girls were seen to be studious and hardworking. And yet, neither group measured up to what McRobbie (2015) termed “the perfect.” Both groups were seen as having opposing strengths and weaknesses. This dichotomy was best exemplified by the following quotes:

*The girls in Lacrosse are probably more popular and they probably don't dress as fancy. And they probably don't focus on school as much. Whereas like ballet, they are more quiet. They don't have a very big group of friends, but they have some. And they probably focus on their school a lot. (Olivia, age 14)*

*I find the girls that are in graceful sports, they do better in school than the girls who are in masculine sports. Because the girls in the masculine sport, they have their sports. And they have their friends. And they're always with their guy friends. And I find that they just like, slack off in school. Whereas the graceful sports, they study a lot and they just have that. Like, they still both do well in school, but I just find that the graceful girls do better in school. (Abigail, age 15)*

The girls in this study were proud of their identity as hardworking, dedicated, and studious individuals. The girls all had long term goals to attend university one day. Like the girls in Pomerantz and Raby's (2017) study on academically successful girls, the girls in this study perceived being smart as requiring more than just academic success. The girls took pride in their ability to balance their hectic schedules. In-line with post-feminism and the supergirl identity, the girls showed a desire to be academically successful. The girls seemed to view their lives from the post-feminist lens that one must constantly focus on self-improvement. Similar to Pomerantz and Raby's (2017) research, the girls in this study did not acknowledge, nor did they seem aware of, the effect of outside influences on an individual's level of success.

The girls in this study seemed to admire the sportier girls, whom they perceived to be more popular, confident, competitive, tough, and easy-going. There was an underlying assumption that sporty girls' personalities aligned with those of boys. In turn, the sporty girls were viewed as having many of the positive qualities associated with males. Sporty girls' success in the masculine field of sport could potentially be considered evidence of gender equality. However, the girls in this study judged sporty girls based on their ability to measure up to boys founded on traditionally masculine ideals of strength.

Although sporty girls and girlie girls were both seen to be meeting neoliberal ideals in some sense, they were also falling short in many ways. While the girlie girls were self-disciplined and hard-working, they were also seen to be lacking in confidence. In current Westernized culture, confidence is seen as a cure for all of women's issues (Gill & Orgad, 2015). As such, the girlie girls lack of confidence is viewed, not as evidence of structural barriers, but rather as evidence of them needing to better themselves.

Sporty girls, on the other hand, were seen to be confident and possess the right personality and strength required to be an ideal girl in neoliberal culture. However, the sporty girls were viewed as unconcerned with their school work. In contrast to the aesthetic sports, more masculine sports were viewed as a distraction from school work. Sporty girls were thus seen to be lacking the discipline and work ethic that they would need to succeed in the future. Moreover, the sporty girls were often perceived as going “too far” and being “too much” like boys. Thus, how girls live the complex experience of success in a post-feminist discourse was seen to be complicated and unattainable.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

The aim of this feminist study was to understand the lived experiences of adolescent females currently participating in aesthetic sports. Specifically, to critically examine the ways in which the new feminine ideal and a post-feminist girl culture shaped the girls' experiences. There were three main findings of this thesis: "Masculinities and Revealing a Higher Social Status in the School Environment", "Framing Success through Gendered and Neoliberal Discourses", and "Constructing an Ideal Image". These themes were connected to a core theme which revealed the complexities girls faced in trying to live up to unattainable neoliberal, post-feminist standards of ideal girlhood. This chapter will ground the findings in the extant literature to reveal new understandings of post-feminist girl culture as it relates to aesthetic sports.

The first major finding revealed that masculinity remains privileged within the school culture. It was clear that masculine sports had a higher social status than aesthetic sports. This supports Schmalz and Kerstetter's (2006) findings, which suggest aesthetic sports are stigmatized. In addition, this study revealed that girls can gain higher social status from participating in masculine sports. A girl's sport participation was an important factor in labeling her personality by her peer group. Girls in masculine sports were often considered to have more masculine personalities and were defined using more positive traits. These results are consistent with research that claims that there is a new feminine ideal which embodies both masculine and feminine qualities (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; Bettis & Adams, 2006; Bettis Ferry, & Roe, 2016; Ezzell, 2009; Gonick 2006).

Previous studies have shown that women are no longer stigmatized for participating in masculine sports as long as they have a highly feminine and heterosexual appearance (Ezzell, 2009; Festle 1996). McRobbie (2008) calls this a post-feminist masquerade, where power is granted to girls so long as they do not disrupt gender relations. This study has shed light on a new phenomenon by which girls in the

more feminine, aesthetic sports now have to engage in their own sort of apologetic behavior for their “excessive” display of traditional femininity. For example, many of the girls avoided dressing overly girly in fear of ridicule and they minimized the amount of makeup they wore at school.

Research has shown that females in masculine sports may engage in ‘defensive othering,’ a practice whereby a group accepts the perceived superiority of the more dominant group (i.e., males) and distances themselves from their own perceived subordinate group (i.e., females; Ezzell, 2009; Finley, 2010). According to Ezzell (2009) and Finley (2010), females in masculine sports sometimes show negative attitudes towards women with overly feminine traits. This study reveals that girls in aesthetic sports are aware of the potential stigma within the school culture attached to their sporting practices.

The finding that it was perceived that boys who participated in aesthetic sports are often stigmatized supports previous research which shows boys who embody feminine qualities are labeled feminine and inferior (Schippers, 2007). This finding is also consistent with research which shows boys in aesthetic sports face stigma (Riemer & Visio, 2003; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006) and heightened homophobia (Grindstaff & West, 2006). And yet, all of the girls in this study said that they would be accepting of a boy who entered into aesthetic sports. Thus, the implications of sexual stigma within the school culture and the potential lower status group among school peers may become a deterrent for boy’s participation in aesthetic sports and further emphasizes and reproduces the denigration of aesthetic sports.

The second main theme revolved around the essentialist understanding that masculinity is superior to femininity (Connell, 1987), as well as neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility. The girls in this study noted that many of their peers perceived that masculine sports were more challenging than aesthetic sports. This is not surprising considering masculine versions of sport are often considered to be more challenging than the gender-marked feminine versions (Messner, 1988). The girls in this

study echoed findings from Eliasson's (2011) study, noting a common assumption among their peers was that boys were inherently better at sport. Instead of being evidence of females' athletic ability, females who excel in sport are often viewed as exceptions to feminine weakness (Craig & Lacroix, 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that girls who excelled in sport could gain status, while girls were still generally viewed as weaker than boys. Despite the common belief that boys are superior in sport, many of the girls in this study felt girls were being underestimated. Most of the girls were confident in their own abilities and they noted many instances in which girls were stronger than boys.

The girls in this study all spoke of aesthetic sport involvement as requiring self-discipline and hard work. While they enjoyed a sense of mastery, they also saw their sport as preparation for their future. Post-feminist discourses promote the idea that girls can do anything they set their minds to (Lazar, 2009). As a result, when girls are unable to live up to an imagined ideal, they may hold themselves and each other personally responsible. A key area in which this could be seen was in the girls' language surrounding health. In neoliberal Western culture, the body is seen to be symbolic of health (Rossing, Ronglan, & Scott, 2014; Winch, 2012). Cairns and Johnson (2015) claim that modern discourses are highly critical of anything considered excessive, and the ideal woman is now expected to eat healthy food and exercise, while avoiding the appearance of restrictive dieting. The girls in this study were critical of girls who they deemed to be either excessively thin or overweight. The girls in this study felt that girls who did not meet the ideal in terms of appearance or weight could easily remedy the situation via living a healthier lifestyle or even simply by becoming more confident. In neoliberal Western society, women's supposed lack of confidence is viewed as a key barrier in overcoming obstacles (Gill & Orgad, 2015).

The third main theme focused on the complexities of constructing an ideal image. The findings from this study support previous research suggesting girlie girls are stigmatized (Holland & Harpin;

Krane et al., 2013), as well as research that shows traditional forms of femininity to be deemed pathetic (Budgeon, 2014). The girls in this study defined girly girls using almost exclusively negative traits. In line with research which suggests a girly girl is so infamous as an object of resentment (Holland & Harpin, 2013), the girls often described girly girls as having conflicting and contrasting negative traits. However, something that set this study apart from previous work is that the girls in this study seemed highly aware that others might perceive them as girly girls. Although the girls enjoyed certain aspects of being girly in the aesthetic sport context, they often concealed their girly identities while at school.

The girls in this study considered school to be a place of judgment by their peer culture. Previous research has shown that the female gaze is pervasive and highly judgmental (Riley, Evans, & Mackiewicz, 2016; Winch, 2012). The girls in the current study cited that girls judge each other frequently and intensely. It is clear the girls are navigating a structural environment that is influenced by both popular culture and location specific cultural norms of their schools. Since these norms are not necessarily congruent, girls are forced to negotiate contrasting ideals. On the one hand, the girls want to look good; on other hand, they risk being ostracized if they fall outside of the normative gender performance accepted at their school. Even though hyper-feminine girls are often devalued (Francis, Archer, Moote, de Witt, & Yeomans, 2016), media depictions of hyper-feminine women as ideal still influence girls (McRobbie, 2004). Thus, many girls may reject hyper feminine girls as a form of defensive action (Schippers, 2007). The girls in this study were highly aware that displaying traditional, and thus old-fashioned, forms of femininity could result in them being judged. As a result, the girls often attempted to downplay their more girly forms of femininity while at school.

As Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz (2016) have noted, the female gaze is pervasive and consumption oriented. In neoliberal society, people are led to believe that they can only become worthy if they achieve neoliberal ideals of success. Within neoliberal discourses there is a myth that “one can

consume oneself into being” (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 247). In other words, people are led to believe that they can become happy and worthy by turning themselves into a commodity (by working for wage) and then endlessly consuming. Thus, it is not surprising that brands were important in the girls’ judgment of others. The girls spoke of others’ clothing choices using neoliberal discourses of autonomous, empowered, and choice. There was no recognition of possible constraints, financial or otherwise, that might affect girls’ ability to wear certain brands. Moreover, the brands that were perceived as popular reflected more masculine and sporty identities.

The girls in this study were proud of their ability to manage their demanding schedules. Gill (2016) points to popular books such as “Lean In” (Sandberg, 2013) as evidence of a liberal, individualistic, style of gender equality becoming popularized. The girls in this study seemed to emulate this corporate style of feminism in their satisfaction with their identity as hardworking, dedicated, and studious individuals with long terms goals. Of course, all of these qualities are in fact positive qualities and there is nothing wrong with the girls feeling proud of this aspect of their identities. However, as Gill (2016) notes, this form of gender equality is problematic because it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, systems of oppression, such as capitalism. Gill notes that these forms of popular feminism claim the solution to inequality is for women to work on themselves instead of working towards social or political transformation. The girls in this study seemed to hold themselves personally responsible for their success without acknowledging outside influences.

The girls in this study viewed sporty girls as having more masculine personalities. In many ways, the girls admired the confidence and strength of the sporty girls. Gill (2016) looks at the ways in which post-feminist discourses have co-opted feminist ideas and used them to create clichéd discourses of empowerment. Gill states that these discourses suggest gender equality has been achieved and girls can accomplish anything they set their minds to.



Finally, this research has shown that masculinity is privileged within the girls' schools. The research highlights how neoliberal and post-feminist discourses have shaped the girls' experiences and caused them to take full responsibility for their outcomes. Finally, the research revealed the intense judgement and scrutiny prevalent within girls' lives. This judgment can be seen as a result of the hierarchy among girls and boys, whereby girls are forced to compete with each other in a gendered and sexist culture.

### **Limitations and Future Research Considerations**

The study has a number of possible limitations. A main limitation of this study is the fact that the participants all come from families with relatively high socio-economic resources. The high tuition fees required in aesthetic sports are a major barrier for participation. Although girls are living in a world where they are supposedly free to make their own choices, in actuality this freedom is nothing more than the freedom to respond to intense outside influences (Chen, 2013). Marginalized girls who lack the financial, social, or academic resources to negotiate their social worlds would have very different experiences from more privileged girls (Raby & Pomerantz, 2013). For example, girls without the resources to participate in sport, as well as those without the resources to carefully construct their image via makeup and clothing, will likely be stigmatized by their peers.

Another limitation was the lack of racial diversity among the participants. Seven of the participants were white and one participant was Asian. Thus, the importance of race, class, and diversity require further study. Since the ideal post-feminist girl is based on middle upper class, white identity (Gill, 2008), girls of different ethnicities likely face additional barriers. Girls of different ethnicities, religions, and geographical locations might have very different lived-

experiences than the girls in the current study. Thus, the importance of intersecting identities needs to be studied further.

### **Practical Implications**

This research pertains specifically to a small sample of girls aged 12-15 from the Hamilton, Haldimand Norfolk, and Niagara regions. Thematic patterns that emerge, nonetheless, offer broader insights into the ways that girls' sporting identities transcend into their identities outside of the sporting domain. This study has illustrated that girls in aesthetic sports feel stigmatized in certain contexts. The findings from this study suggest that aesthetic sports are only offered in schools within a limited capacity. The aesthetic sports offered outside of schools are costly and thus many parents may not be able to afford enrolling their children in these sports. A main implication for practice would be for schools to offer more aesthetic sports programs, both as after school programs and during physical education classes. Since aesthetic sports are stigmatized, children might not openly admit to wanting more opportunities to engage in these activities. It would therefore be valuable for schools to offer the classes (e.g., as curricular or extracurricular opportunities) regardless of whether or not there are a high demand for them. Additionally, municipal programs offering aesthetic sports should look into ways to reduce costs associated with these sports. For example, there could be subsidized programming as well as recreational programs offered that do not involve costly dance costumes and competitions.

Moreover, boys who enter aesthetic sports are at a high risk for being socially ridiculed through mechanisms of sexual stigma. Thus, a main implication of these findings is that educators and sport practitioners should work to reduce the devaluation of aesthetic sports. For example, aesthetic sport classes should not be gender marked and should be advertised as being open to boys and girls. Likewise, sport organizations should re-consider the expectation that participants wear costumes and makeup at sport performances and competitions.

By revealing the homophobia present in adolescent perceptions of aesthetic sport, this study also serves to emphasize the importance of education. Previous research has found that silence surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity is the most significant barrier faced by LGBT student athletes (Barber & Kane, 2007). It is therefore clear that education and awareness are required within schools and sport organizations in order to disrupt the heterosexist culture. This can be done by providing diversity and inclusion training to all teachers and staff members, as well as, through offering workshops for children and their parents.

In sum, there is a common belief that gender equality has been achieved and thus, feminism is no longer necessary or relevant. These discourses promote the idea that girls can achieve anything they set their minds to without gender getting in their way as a structural hindrance. Consequently, girls are discouraged from acknowledging sexism. Similar to what Finley (2010) has argued, I argue that these alternative femininities, such as the sporty girls' identity, are still based on notions of male dominance, and they are not necessarily disrupting gender relations. Discourses surrounding empowerment of girls needs to be restructured in order to acknowledge the positive aspects of feminine qualities. In a culture that privileges masculine ideals and hyper-competitive practices, it is valuable to focus more on appreciating the feminine qualities that are so readily overlook.

## **Post-Script Reflections**

### **Reflections on Self**

The first time I heard about the "3 Minute Thesis" competition at Brock, I immediately knew that I wanted to compete. The competition challenges graduate students to present their research in 90 seconds, using only one power-point slide. After having interviewed the girls for this study, my desire to enter the competition intensified. My research was interesting and the interviews had revealed rich data. Having always loved presenting, I was excited to share my

research with a broader audience. The first round of the competition was a success and I won a spot as a top five finalist. Winning the first round made me even more eager and I set out to perfect my speech before the next round. Unfortunately, when the competition day came, things did not go as expected.

As I stumbled on my words, I looked out at the crowd of faces watching me, and slowly my mind went blank. Without any real embarrassment, I mumbled I had forgotten my speech and went to sit down. As I watched the remaining presenters, I began to ruminate on what had just happened. How was this possible? I loved presentations and had always excelled on stage. This was the first time in my life that I had put so much effort into such a short speech. What did I do wrong? By that night, I went from finding this as nothing more than a peculiar mistake to sobbing uncontrollably over the perceived embarrassment and disappointment over what had just happened. So, for the first time in my life, I booked an appointment with the university counselor.

Feeling much better after my first session of counseling, I decided to continue for a few more sessions. Through counseling, I was able to unpack a lot of my own biases and assumptions surrounding this research. As I spoke to my counselor about my frustrations surrounding my own inabilities and my worries I would never be able to fit into a more formal business context, my counselor laughed. She said it was amusing to see how someone advocating for the appreciation of feminine qualities was unable to appreciate these qualities in herself. Through counseling, I began to realize I was unconsciously privileging masculine traits in myself and others. As I learned about neoliberalism and post-feminism, I was able to see the ways in which I had been affected by this culture. Without realising it, I have been trying to reach an unattainable neoliberal idea of perfection. I constantly push myself to work harder to achieve academic and professional success. At the same time, I have given myself little credit for my

qualities traditionally seen as feminine, such as my empathetic nature. Many times, I have viewed my emotional nature as hindering my ability to work quickly and efficiently.

### **Reflections on the Girls**

Interviewing the girls in this study was by far the most enjoyable experience of the entire process. Having grown up around aesthetic sports, I found that I easily and effortlessly connected with the girls. I saw myself in many of the girls' stories, but also gained a lot of new perspectives and learned things that I had never thought of before. I related to the girls' love of the aesthetic sport classes' sense of routine, structure, and creativity. And I found myself noticing how many of their mannerisms I shared. For example, many of the girls would preface their sentences with phrases such as "Umm, well, I think it might be because..." The girls balanced their competitiveness and desire to be successful with a nice girl persona. In many ways, I felt like the experience was somewhat therapeutic for the girls. After our initial small talk, the girls seemed to really open up and seemed relieved to be talking to someone who really understood what they were going through.

As the girls spoke, I was surprised to see that they shared many of my desire to constantly self-improve. I was also shocked at just how hard the girls worked and how much pressure they were under. When I was at a similar age, my schedule was much less demanding and I was nowhere near as concerned for my future as these girls were. It was interesting to see the consistency among the girls when they described the ideal girl. I was surprised at just how homogenous and detailed the requirements for perfection have become. For example, wearing foundation, eyeliner, and mascara was viewed as acceptable, but wearing foundation, eyeliner, mascara, lipstick, and having eyebrows done was deemed excessive. Through the interviews, I could see the changing culture wherein girls are now expected to be mini experts in their lives.

I also noticed how the girls' mothers seemed eager to understand their daughters' experiences.

With the daughters' permission, several of the mothers sat within earshot of the interview. As they pretended to be casually engaged in various activities such as reading, I could see their interest in hearing their daughter's stories. Several of the mothers also intervened to clarify and ask their daughter questions of their own. After the interviews, many of the mothers said they found my research interesting and expressed a desire to read the final version of my thesis.

### **Reflections on Social Justice**

There have been numerous times throughout this research that I have questioned whether or not this even counts as social justice work. Although this topic is meaningful to me, my true passions lie in the deeper, darker aspects of the world. What truly enrages me is the depth of the inequalities in the world. Sport has always been a fix in my mind. It was a great equalizer. And yet, here I am, studying girls from upper- middle class families. I often thought about all of the girls who would never have the opportunity to participate in sports that have a high cost to play.

Ultimately, I realized that this work is important and significant. Sport helps to shape society and is thus a significant area of study. As researchers and sport practitioners we have to ask ourselves- do we want to continue on this path where we mold our children into "confident, independent, and driven" leaders without concern for their levels of empathy? Surely some of the traditionally feminine values such as being concerned for others are useful. So, as I wrote in my aforementioned three minute thesis speech: "Instead of telling girls they can do anything boys can do, perhaps it's time we value gender diversity. Because it's not about boys versus girls. It's about people. In a culture that is saturated with masculine ideals and hyper-competitive practices, it is valuable to focus more on appreciating the qualities traditionally seen as feminine that we so aptly overlook. My research is important because it views aesthetic sports from a feminist perspective that values feminine traits and female agency. Only by hearing first-hand accounts of girls' perspectives can we begin to understand how to ensure equity in

young women's sporting lives.”

In sum, this master's thesis has been an amazing experience, resulting in my personal and academic growth. This experience has challenged me intellectually, as well as, emotionally. More than ever, I am convinced that the devaluation of feminine qualities is something that needs to be addressed. I am hopeful that this research can inspire others, and advance sociological understandings of both sport and girl culture.

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## **Appendix A- Recruitment Poster**

**Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies Brock University**

### **PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR INTERVIEW**



### **EXPLORING GIRLS' EXPERIENCE OF AESTHETIC SPORTS**

**We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study to help us better understand girls' experiences of aesthetic sports**

Potential participants should be between 12-15 years old. Participants must be currently enrolled in a feminine sport (cheerleading, gymnastics, dance, and/or figure skating). As a participant in this study, your child will be asked to come to attend an interview for one hour.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

**Laura Kovac. Graduate Student**  
**Brock University**  
**Dept. of Social Justice and Equity Studies**  
**Lk10sh@brocku.ca**

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Research Ethics Board at Brock University  
Ethics file #: INSERT FILE NUMBER  
Graduate thesis advisor: Dr. Dawn Trussell, [dtrussell@brocku.ca](mailto:dtrussell@brocku.ca)

## **Appendix B- Interview Guide**

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of girls currently participating in aesthetic sports. I am interested in learning your views and perceptions of aesthetic sports. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

### **1)Logistical Questions**

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- What activities/ sports/clubs do you participate in?
- How long have you been involved in (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating)?

### **2)Describe a typical (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating) class**

- What do you enjoy about it? What do you find difficult about it?
- Why did you start taking this class? Do you want to continue? Why or why not?
- Do many boys participate in this sport? Why or why not?
- Do you think (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating) has changed over time? If so, in what ways?

### **3) Are there any differences between girls who are in (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance / figure skating) versus those who are in other sports/ no sports?**

- If you had to describe a typical girl in aesthetic sports, what would she be like?
- Imagine girls in masculine sports. Describe what they might be like.



-Do you feel like you are a “typical” (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating)?  
Why or why not?

**4)Do you think being a (cheerleader, gymnast, dancer, figure skater) will change how other people see you? If so, how? If not, why not?**

-Do you feel like (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating) have a high or a low status?

-Do you feel like (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating) has benefits for girls?

-Do you participate in any sports that are more aggressive or involve physical contact (e.g., hockey)? How are your experiences different? Why did you, did you not choose to participate in them?

**5) Do you think (cheerleaders, gymnasts, dancers, figure skaters) are athletes? Why or why not?**

-Do you think your peers or society thinks the same as you?

-What makes something a sport?

-What are differences between (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating) and more aggressive or physical contact sports?

**6) Are there any topics or areas that I have missed that you would like to discuss?**

## **Appendix C- Letter of Invitation**

**Date:**

**Project Title: Exploring Girls' Experiences of Aesthetic Sports**

Principal Student Investigator (PSI): **Laura Kovac**  
Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies  
Brock University  
Email: lk10sh@brocku.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Dawn Trussell, PhD  
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies  
Brock University  
(905) 688-5550 ext. 4580.  
Email: dtrussell@brocku.ca

### **INVITATION**

Your daughter is invited to participate in a study. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of girls in aesthetic sport. Specifically, I want to understand how the changing girl culture has shaped their idea of the ideal female.

### **WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As a participant, your daughter will be asked to participate in an interview where they will share her thoughts and perceptions about her experiences in an aesthetic sport. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. I would like to audio record the interviews if your daughter agrees. If they would not like to be audio recorded, I will take written notes during the interview.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

The possible benefits for your daughter's participation include helping expand the knowledge base about perceptions of feminine qualities and aesthetic sports. There are no known or anticipated risks with your daughter's participation in this study.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information your daughter shares will be kept confidential except as required by mandatory reporting laws related to child abuse and neglect. Their name and any identifiers will be kept anonymous and will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study. However, with your daughter's permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Pseudonyms will also be used in the reporting of results where names are needed.

All data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the office of the Principal Student Investigator. All audio recordings will be destroyed immediately after transcription. All paper and electronic forms of data collected during the study will be destroyed after 5 years. Only the Principal Student Investigator and Faculty Supervisor will have access to the documents.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

As this is a study with minors, participation will only be granted if both you, the parent, and your daughter agree to participation. Your daughter's participation in this study is voluntary. At any point during the interview, they may decline to answer any questions. If you or your daughter wishes to withdraw from the study, the interview will be terminated without penalty and all data will be confidentially destroyed. Since it would be difficult to separate the data in the advanced stage of data analysis, participants right to withdrawal will end after 3 weeks from the interview data.

### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

The results of this study will be used in a master's thesis and presented to faculty members and students of Brock University. A summary of the research will be emailed to you at the completion of the study.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Laura Kovac using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [insert REB file number]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

## **Appendix D- Youth Information Sheet**

Dear <participant name>,

This study is trying to understand what your thoughts and ideas are about participating in a sport (i.e., cheerleading, rhythmic gymnastics, figure skating, dance). I am going to talk about what my study is about for a few minutes and then I am going to ask you if you would like to be a part of it.

### Who am I?

My name is Laura Kovac and I am a student in the Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies at Brock University.

### Why am I meeting with you?

I would like to tell you about a study that involves girls like yourself, and would like to see if you want to be in the study too.

### Why am I doing this study?

I want to find out what your thoughts and ideas are about participating in a sport such as cheerleading, rhythmic gymnastics, figure skating, and/or dance. I also want to learn more about how you think others perceive these sports.

### What will happen if you are in the study?

If you agree to be part of my study, I will ask you some questions about the sports you play. I would like to talk to you for about 60 minutes in total. I would also like to audio record you so we can remember what you said. Just try your best to answer the questions based on what you think, there are no right or wrong answers. If you don't know how to answer, you can guess or say 'I don't know' and we can move on to the next question. If you are unsure about one of your answers, you can clarify it at a later time if you would like.

### Potential Benefits and Risks,

It is possible that you may feel upset based on the nature of the questions I ask. It is important for you to know that you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

If I ask any questions you do not want to answer, just tell me you do not want to answer them and we will skip them. I will ask questions about the sports you play. An example of a question I will ask is "Describe a typical (cheerleading/ rhythmic gymnastics/ dance/ figure skating) class. What do you enjoy about it? What do you find difficult about it?"

I will not tell anyone other than my supervisor what you say or let them see your answers. Your parents, teachers, teammates will never see the answers you gave me. The only time I might have to break this promise is if I think you or someone else might be at risk of being hurt. If you tell me of any abuse, or if I suspect abuse, I will have to report the abuse to child protective services.

### Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. No one will get angry or upset at you if you don't want to be in it. Just tell us you don't want to be in the study. And remember, if you decide to be in the study and then later change your mind, then you have three weeks to tell us you don't want to be in the study and we will not use any of the information you told us.

Do you have any questions?

If you have questions, you can ask them at any time. You can ask them now or later. You can talk to me or someone else at any time during the study. Here is my email address that you can reach me at: [lk10sh@brocku.ca](mailto:lk10sh@brocku.ca).

Thanks for all your help,

Laura Kovac

### Appendix E-Permission Form for a Minor

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Laura Kovac of the Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies at Brock University. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that my daughter will participate in the study if she agrees to participate and I agree to her participation.

I acknowledge that all information gathered on this project will be used for research purposes only and will be considered confidential. I am aware that permission may be withdrawn up to three weeks after the interview has taken place (by either the parent and/or the child) without penalty by advising the researchers.

I realize that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (Insert REB file number). I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting about daughter's involvement in this study, I may contact the Manager, Research Ethics at (905) 688-5550 ext. 3035 or reb@brocku.ca.

Daughter's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Daughter's Age: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to have my daughter's interview audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of her responses.

☐ YES    ☐ NO

I also agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research, with the understanding that all quotations will be anonymous.

☐ YES    ☐ NO

Phone number you can be reached at during your child's interview:

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent or Guardian (please print):

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent or Guardian:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Please keep a copy of this form for your records\*

## **Appendix F- Feedback Letter**

### **Date**

Dear (INSERT NAME OF PARTICIPANT),

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. As a reminder the purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the experiences of currently participating in aesthetic sports.

Please remember that any data pertaining to you as an individual participant will be kept confidential and anonymous. Once the data are collected and analyzed for this project, I will produce a final write-up. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the results of this study, or if you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at the phone number or email address listed at the bottom of the page. If you would like a summary of the results, please let me know. When the study is completed, I will send it to you.

As with all Brock University projects involving human participants, this project was reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

I would like to once again thank you for assisting us with this project. It was a pleasure to have met you and to learn some of your experiences that will hopefully help girls navigate their sporting and social lives.

Best wishes,

Laura Kovac, Graduate Student  
Brock University  
Dept. of Social Justice and Equity Studies.  
(905) 536-7371  
Lk10sh@brocku.ca